

/ The Lumber Mill

The ceaseless flow of the river fascinated Maluka. The smooth silent movement of the water made him feel at home, for the Fraser was very much like the Sutlej gliding through the plains of the Punjab. It was much easier to become intimate with the river than with the unknown people in a strange country. There was something very generous and inviting about it. The seagulls flew low over it, turning their wings with graceful agility; they swooped suddenly to float on its surface with a fond familiarity. And with the rising tide even the leafy branches of the thick shrubbery on the bank played softly over it. The buds were opening on the wild rose bushes half revealing the yellow stamens, and the honeybees hovered over the tiny cups of pink petals.

But it was different today. It was Maluka's third working day on the green chain in the Dominion Lumber Mills. The five hours of the forenoon had dragged away slowly; five, or seven with overtime, were yet to go. A turbaned teenager, Maluka was big for his age and strong, but the green lumber was heavy, for the mill had been cutting a special order of hemlock all morning. He had quickly finished his lunch of brown beans *dal* and buttered *chappatis*, and carried his tea, half milk and generously sugared, in a huge white enamelled iron cup to the weather-beaten bench by the river in front of the Hindu cookhouse.

The Fraser rippled with the light breeze and gleamed like the Sutlej under the midday sun. But it looked remote now, for the traffic had turned it into a part of the strange New World. Ugly tugboats, belching thick smoke from their low black funnels, chugged with irritating monotony, broken by a shrill whistle. They towed huge scows—downstream showing little of themselves under the immense loads of lumber, and upstream their flat emptiness bobbing clumsily, revealing more of their massive creosoted underbellies with each little crest. Or they pulled booms of reddish-brown logs, fresh from the woods,

held together by heavy iron chains and long boom-sticks. A small freighter, its paint peeling, loaded to the waterline, moved with great effort.

His body aching with fatigue, Maluka thought of the leisurely old world he had left behind. So far away, and yet it stood right in front of his eyes—the blooming fields of cotton and corn, the dark-green groves of mango trees, the long-horned cattle with beautiful humps, and the creaking wooden carts moving so as not to blow the dust. Fascinating pictures flashed through his mind like arrows from afar. Men and women in flowing colourful garments walking and talking noisily in the crowded bazaar; the shoppers resting under the shady trees by the roadside sharing tidbits and gossip. Young girls with twinkling black eyes and gleaming white teeth spinning at their hand wheels and singing; boisterous boys with lithe brown bodies playing *kabadi* in the moonlight; happy families gathered around the hearth in the dim light for a simple meal. Pictures so bright and gay, so vivid and yet so far. Their distance made his heart ache.

It was rest time for the mill hands, and Maluka needed it more than anyone else. The seagulls were perched on the round flat tops of the faded brown creosoted piles, streaked with their droppings. More of them relaxed in short rows on the rusty bars of the discarded iron cages, once used for creosoting wooden bricks, which had made the streets of Vancouver look like the scaly back of some strange amphibian monster. Charlie, the Chinese vegetable vendor, was rowing back his empty boat to Lulu Island, a lush green flatness in the greyish blue river, as if he had the whole afternoon to reach home. Maluka didn't hear any humming of the bees on the wild rose bushes, and the thick round leaves of the poplar trees stirred gently. It seemed that the pointed tips of tall conifers had ceased their striving for the sky. And the Fraser flowed like a tired stream.

The short sharp five-minutes' whistle of the mill aroused Maluka from his reveries. The Sikh workers responded like a battalion to the bugle call; many of them had served in the British Imperial Army before they had migrated to Canada over fifteen years back. In a second they were on their feet reaching for their gloves and heavy leather aprons.

'Time to go, partner,' called Natha Singh with the commanding accent of a former non-commissioned officer. He knew that Maluka felt lonely and bewildered by the striking change from a sleepy friendly village in the Punjab to the hurly-burly of a modern mill in the New World. He had been watching him gaze vacantly at the river through the cookhouse window.

'You are young, Maluka,' he said with an avuncular concern. 'And youth is like the river. It always looks ahead.'

'But the river has no memories,' replied Maluka pensively.

'It *has* memories, Maluka,' said Natha Singh with emphasis, 'but it doesn't brood over them. It carries them in its quiet flow. But it cannot go back to the mountains no matter how sharp and fresh the memories. It sings its way to the sea.'

Maluka got up with a lump in his throat.

'Look at me,' continued Natha Singh as he patted him on the back. 'I am getting old but I still look ahead. Like everyone, I carry my past within me, and at times its burden feels heavy. But I don't brood over it.'

He was a strong man with a huge frame, and not at all deceived by his neatly tied black beard, which he had dyed to fool the bosses who would not hire an old man.

Maluka felt encouraged by his self-assurance, and his energetic way of speaking gave him strength.

'Only five hours to go, young man,' Natha Singh assured him with a rich smile. 'No overtime this evening.'

Soon they joined the black-turbaned bearded men in blue dungarees walking briskly through the lumberyard alleys to their work places inside the mills or out in the open. The 'Chinks', a similar crew of working men, emerged from the Chinese cookhouse through the lumber-yard on the opposite side, and another from the white men's bunk houses which stood a little farther closer to the river.

Within two minutes, all the saws—the huge circular head saws, the smaller and powerful saws in the edger, the band saw, the rip saws, the trim saws and the long row of saws that cut the slabs and the cull into firewood were whirring and buzzing at full speed. Together with the clanging and creaking and turning of the different chain systems and the roller systems, the din became so deafening that the long whistle for starting the afternoon run could hardly be heard inside the mill.

The once graceful conifers, which had stood like silent prayers in the woods, lay on the log table like dripping carcasses shorn of their tops, roots and branches. Each, in turn, was pushed onto the carriage by the slight move of the lever by the sawyer, turned over like a fat pencil by a steam-driven 'nigger' to the right position, hooked firmly in its place by the doggers, and advanced by the setter as signalled to be cut by the headsaws with fierce speed into long slabs, thick broad pieces and neat rectangular timber, the sawdust blowing out like a miniature sand storm. Only the light reddish-brown timber, the heart of the majestic firs, was spared further agony; it moved out of the mill over a long straight row of rollers with an aristocratic air. The other pieces raced over the different chain systems and roller systems to be processed through the different machines, as required by the order of the day, before they dropped as lumber on the green chain. Their rough ends trimmed, they were graded by Guss, a fat bald-headed Greek with steel-rimmed glasses, who marked each piece with a letter or a number with his thick black crayon before the Sikh workers pulled them on the low wooden trucks, parked wheel to wheel on both sides of the table.

It was a part of Maluka's job to pull the cull, often water-soaked and half-rotten, from the table. It came in large batches when the logs were bad.

'The Greek doesn't see too well,' remarked Natha Singh as he came to give a hand to Maluka, 'he is marking C for cull what should be marked R for the rip saw.'

'There is some good lumber in it,' agreed Maluka.

'Several of us who have worked on the green chain for eight or ten years know enough about lumber to do the grading better than Guss,' added Natha Singh after straightening the pieces on the truck with quick flips by his hands. 'But none of us, nor any other oriental, no matter how good, would be employed as a grader or a tally man in the lumber yard.'

'Nor would he be allowed to run a machine,' he added indifferently after a long pause, as if he were talking about something far beyond his reach.

Maluka thought this to be very odd, but he kept quiet. He was too busy watching for the pieces with the markings assigned to him for pulling off the fast-moving chain. And it moved

like fate, persistent and inexorable. He felt very embarrassed if the pieces passed by and fell down at the end of the chain for everybody to see. And to carry them back to the proper truck meant more work; it also added to the embarrassment.

Natha Singh had spoken without anger or jealousy. He had mentioned the incredible job discrimination as if he were talking about the weather, without a trace of resentment in his voice. He was glad to have a job under cover even if strenuous for a man his age. It rained much in the region, and humidity at times was heavy. This was bad for his rheumatism, and made it hard for him to take a lighter job out in the open. He was getting twenty-five cents an hour, or three cents more than the yard workers and seven cents more than Maluka; the white workers got five to eight cents more for similar work. It was not a great deal, but he was earning in a month, he would recall, more than what he had received as a non-commissioned officer in the British Indian Army. What pleased him more was that at the end of the day a hot bath and a bottle of whisky waited for him to relieve the fatigue. And there was a jovial companionship in the bunk house; people talked with a warm heart, responded instinctively to others' moods and feelings and, in spite of their quarrelling, they were always ready to help one another.

'What's there to complain, Maluka,' he would say contentedly, 'life is good!'

The lumber often came in batches of one marking or another, depending on the quality of the logs, but the Sikhs helped each other in a cooperative militant spirit. They talked much as they worked, and as loudly as they had done in the village, hoeing the fields or holding the wooden plough while driving the oxen. And they enjoyed the collective effort like a joint assault on the enemy, hurling in a moment of stress a challenging shout, exacting from each a little more for the final stroke.

The sawyer and the bandsaw man had stopped operations to change the saws, and shortly after the pause the green chain was running thin with lumber for a moment. The men moved a little closer to each other to talk more easily.

'Handsome looking Hindu boy, Natha!' said Guss the grader in a lascivious tone, his deep-set beady eyes hardly

visible behind the thick lenses. 'I wish I had a partner like him,' he added with a byzantine grin.

'The dirty Greek,' muttered Natha Singh as he moved to pull the long heavy boards of two by twelve, clean and fresh with the odour of the fir. The chain was soon loaded with a tangled mass of lumber. It was pulling under a great strain but with undiminished tempo. Each man was trying desperately to pull out his pieces as fast as he could.

'Ask the Greek to stop the chain for a minute,' shouted two hard-pressed men at the end of the table, who saw their markings on the ends of a heap of boards.

'It won't help,' replied Guss, 'the lumber is piled high on the chain feeding this. It will soon be dumped on the green chain. There is worse in store for us.'

II

Maluka was even more bewildered by the living conditions of the Punjabi workers at the mill than by the speed and strength required for the job on the green chain. He had imagined life in Canada as one of comfort and convenience unknown to the Indian villages.

Back home, he had seen, in the pleasant winter months, the recently arrived Sikhs from the New World wandering leisurely in the busy bazaars of Hoshiarpur and Jullundur. Tall, straight men with broad shoulders, they looked very impressive and prosperous in their dark American suits and colourful turbans of Japanese silk. They were greatly admired by all, more so by the students, largely because of the reflected glory of the legendary heroes of the Ghadr, the abortive armed revolt to free India which the Indian émigrés in the New World had attempted in 1914. Many new schools, including a few girls' schools, established in remote areas, testified to their far-sighted patriotism and generosity. Also, it was their financial contribution that had made possible the publication of several Punjabi weekly journals from Jullundur and Amritsar, and an English daily from Delhi, all devoted to arouse India to fight for freedom. People thought much of them and of the New World which had imbued them with such enthusiasm for the welfare of their folks

back home. They were the envy of the young, and an example for the ambitious to follow.

'Come in, Sardarjee,' the cloth merchants would entreat them as they passed by, 'do us the favour to sit down and have a look.' They would then open bolts of cloth before them with a flourish, and indicate with a terse phrase and pointed gestures: 'This gorgeous velvet for the proud ladies of the household.' 'This sturdy chintz for the sportive boys at the school,' and 'This cream-smooth calico shirting for the Sardars!'

Maluka had heard the visitors comment harshly about the swarms of flies on the round brass trays and on the artistic tower-like arrangement of sweetmeats, as they purchased these in large quantities at the colourful stalls built over the open drains. The fat *halwai*, his smoke-soiled *kurta* hanging around him more loosely than his flesh, happy at the large sale, would smile ingratiatingly and blow away the flies with a whisk reaching all over the display. To a poor villager who had complained of a dead fly in his milk, he had asked saucily: 'Did you expect to find a dead elephant in the two *paisas*' worth of milk?' To the Sikhs he had said half-guiltily, 'What can I do? The poor flies like my *jallaibis* no less than the rich Khalsa from Amreeka.' And the Sikhs in their exotic suits had laughed uproariously. 'The flies are as insolent as the *halwai* is mischievous,' they had remarked as the repulsive creatures settled down again on the tempting sweets. 'Ah, Sardarjee, let everyone enjoy life', the vendor had added contentedly, 'even the gods couldn't resist the *matthai* I make!'

Here in the New World, so clean and prosperous, the Punjabi workers went about, except on week-ends, in messy blue working clothes, like the coolies, and lived, like the Chinese, in slummy little ghettos in Vancouver, or in ramshackle sheds on the work premises, isolated from the local people who looked down upon them. At the Dominion Mills they lived in bunk houses. Six long parallel sheds with tarred-paper roofs, each partitioned into small rooms with two bunks in each. They had been built on the marshy bank of the Fraser filled with the mill refuse and covered over by soggy layers of saw-dust. With time, they had acquired a weather-beaten dark-gray look, and had sunk almost foot into the saw-dust. In the passage way of these sheds, on both sides, hung dirty working clothes.

almost touching the rows of heavy working shoes and the black gum boots under them, and on the worn-out boards of the floor the nail heads stood bare and shiny.

'It's the saw-dust that makes it impossible to get rid of the bugs,' said Natha Singh, 'That's where they breed, faster than we can kill them.'

'And you can't complain,' he added with a mixture of irony and amusement. 'If you work hard enough during the day, say the bosses, you will have no trouble sleeping at night!'

About a dozen snug-looking houses, their dark-brown shingled sides contrasting sharply with the door and windows painted white, faced the inter-urban electric car-line running between Vancouver and New Westminster. The bosses of the different sections of the mill and the technical personnel—the sawyer, the filer, the engineer, and the mill-wright—lived in these with their families. Early in the morning, every day except Sunday, a number of white workers carrying black lunch boxes straggled down the rough stone and dirt wagon-road on the hillside above Marine Drive. They lived in small houses, often mere shacks, on the clearings half-hidden by the second-growth conifers and brushwood standing thick like a jungle.

The 'Hindu boys', as the Indian workers, mostly Sikh farmers from the Punjab, were called locally, ran their own co-operative kitchen, each paying his share of the food and a day's wages towards the cook's monthly salary. Over a hundred of them were employed by the mill. Everybody, including very religious Sikhs, spoke of themselves as Hindus, partly to distinguish themselves from the Red Indians, reduced to a dying race by the conquering whites, and partly because the white man's discrimination against them recognized no religious distinctions.

III

The cookhouse was a long shed, lying perpendicularly to bunk houses. It had a huge cooking stove in one corner and an old oblong heater in the centre. Long tables covered with oil cloth, and wooden benches by them, were set against three sides. The fourth opened to the bathroom built on the river; and conveniently close to it; an open fire burning under old oil

barrels, supported on low stone walls, supplied continuous hot water. The walls of the cookhouse, ship-lap boards with knot-holes nailed to the rough four-by-four pieces supporting the roof, were decorated with fly-blown calendars of several previous years. Some carried the pictures, single or in groups, of the Indian national leaders—Gandhi, Tilak, Azad, Lajpat Rai—in faded blue ink, and others of the Sikh Gurus—Nanak, Arjan, Gobind Singh—in bright gaudy colours.

The cookhouse which had a pantry and the cook's room at the back, served as the kitchen, the dining hall and the club house. Most of the social life of the colony was lived in it, and hot tea was always on the tap. Men walked in and out to relax and to gossip, to argue and to quarrel, often merely to relieve boredom. Here they gathered to listen to the community leaders, who came from Vancouver, Victoria or other small settlements in the lumber mills on the Vancouver Island, to collect money for a school or a Gurdwara, for a religious or political movement in the Punjab. Here the more gifted among them read aloud the Punjabi classics, recited poetry or sang familiar village songs stirring deep sentiments and powerful longings for the half-forgotten joys of old.

The reading aloud of newspapers was a popular and a more regular source of entertainment in the cookhouse. And in the colony, mostly illiterate, the reader enjoyed an enviable status, which often led to rivalry. He was expected not merely to read the news items, but also to make them more meaningful by giving the necessary background information and by indicating their significance. He was, in fact, more of a speaker than a reader who made the items interesting by quick-witted comments. The audience, moreover, was always ready to interrupt with pointed questions and spicy observations. This often led to a lively discussion, and at times to a heated argument, in which everyone joined with more enthusiasm than intelligence, and the noise drowned the issue in a loud confusion. If the religious and political items led to heated, often angry, exchanges among the listeners, it was the simple earthy episode relating to love and life and human folly, easily grasped by all, that brought out the most spicy comments in the colourful and striking Punjabi idiom.

'If Waris Shah could have listened in on these gatherings,'

Natha Singh would say, 'his *Hir-Ranjha* would have been greatly improved in many of its outspoken passages by a more juicy phrase, a richer innuendo and a more tantalizing word.'

Ganda Singh, who had discarded his turban and shaved off his beard, read regularly the monthly *Ghadr*, published by the Gadhr Party headquarters in San Francisco, and he read it as often as he could get an audience. He always managed to bring in, often without relevance, sarcastic comments about Gandhi or provocative observations about religion or old social customs, all of which he condemned as anti-revolutionary.

'Stick to the reading, Ganda,' the cook, an orthodox Sikh who often acted as a self-appointed moderator of these gatherings, would say with obvious irritation, 'we have heard these comments so often that even the boards of the cookhouse can repeat them.'

Bhai Tara Singh, on the other hand, a pious, praying and *pukka* Sikh, was a devoted reader of the daily *Akali*, which he received from Amritsar by surface mail in fat rolls. The Bhai, as everybody called him out of respect for his strict observance of the tenets of the Sikh faith, including the five K's,* always read with the deliberate drawn-out voice of a serious, disciplined man accustomed to giving religious instruction. His comments were often dull and the tone of his voice could easily become fanatical, but it was the reaction of the audience to these that provided the entertainment.

The reading of the *Vancouver Sun*, a task performed formerly by Gian Chand, a cultivated man who was well-versed in Urdu and Persian literature, but had picked up the English language only after his arrival in British Columbia, had been assigned to Maluka. 'The boyee can do it much better than me,' he had said modestly, on transferring his role to Maluka, 'I was too old when I started to learn English.'

Bhai Tara Singh had finished reading in a passionate voice an appeal in the *Akali* to the Sikhs abroad to abide by the tenets of their faith, respect the five K's and to follow the path

* The Sikhs are enjoined upon by Guru Gobind Singh, the founder of the *Khalsa*, the militant Sikh commonwealth, to wear *Kach* (shorts), *Kura* (steel bangle), *Kirpan* (sword), *Kanga* (comb) and *Kesh* (unshorn hair).

of the Guru. As he warmed up to the comments, Ganda Singh was already fidgeting with annoyance on the bench.

'What's a man without religion, a man without God?' asked Bhai rhetorically. 'He is like a son without a father,' he gave the answer with smiling self-satisfaction. 'He is, in fact, a bastard,' he emphasized, 'and those who cut their *kesh*, fail to observe the discipline enjoined upon them by the Guru, and leave his glorious path have chosen to become bastards. And that is a great shame!'

'I'd rather be an intelligent bastard,' interjected Ganda Singh, 'than a stupid religious ass with dark blinkers.'

'You get your guidance from the godless communists who know little about the nature of man, and dream of a perfect world,' replied Bhai, his large eyes flashing.

'I get my guidance from my intelligence,' said Ganda, 'and I haven't placed it under mortgage to the narrow, word-bound custodians of faith.'

'Easy, Ganda, easy,' intervened Natha Singh, to whom religion was a matter of the heart and not of argument.

'Everybody uses his intelligence,' said Bhai, 'but higher truths of life are beyond reason.'

'But you write to Amritsar even to ask whether you could eat in a non-*jhatka** restaurant in Vancouver,' replied Ganda, 'You have crossed seven seas to come here,' he continued, 'and you ask a bunch of bloated frogs sitting around a holy pond at Amritsar for guidance about your eating. 'Bhaijee,' he said with emphasis, 'an intelligent man would eat where other men eat, and an ass or a horse would graze with his kind in the fields.'

'I follow the discipline of my faith, the path of Guru Gobind Singh,' said Tara Singh, 'the Guru who had revolutionized our society and transformed the terrified people from timid sparrows into aggressive hawks.'

'And what food restrictions did the Guru's guerillas observe?' asked Ganda. 'Didn't he advise them that when in doubt touch the food with your steel bangle, pronounce *Sat Sri Akal* (God is True) and eat?'

* *Jhatka* is the Sikh equivalent of *kosher*. It means the meat of an animal killed with one stroke.

'That's right, that's the truth,' came several voices.

'And the steel bangle was so handy that the purification took no time,' added Natha Singh.

'But we are not engaged in a guerilla warfare now,' said Tara Singh subdued by the voices against him.

'All life is a battle', said Arjan Singh, the cook, who disliked arguments, 'and to feed a hundred hungry Sikhs, *jhatka* or no *jhatka*, is a battle enough for me.'

'Bhaijee,' said Ganda, scoring a triumph with a rapid flow of crisp sentences, 'Guru Gobind Singh was a great revolutionary. He revived a degenerate society. He breathed fresh life into dry bones. He created a new man with an open mind and a courageous heart. A man of firm faith, but a free man—free of horrible superstitions and stupid taboos, free of caste and creed, free of priestcraft': Ganda looked at his admiring listeners with joy and exclaimed: 'But if he were to come today, he would be shocked. What amazing progress the world has made since my time, he would say, but you, my brave Sikhs, haven't moved an inch from where I left you!'

The audience burst into laughter, much to the embarrassment of Bhai Tara Singh. He was a good man and true to his conviction, but he often annoyed people with his narrow attitude and pompous ways.

'Let us leave religion', said the cook, 'we get enough of it in the Gurdwara.'

'Give us some items of news from the English paper,' he asked Maluka.

Maluka had already selected the items that would interest them. He began to give these each in a short summary.

Although Gandhi's post-war non-cooperative movement had collapsed and in 1922 the Mahatma was relaxing in what he called His Majesty's Rest House, the Canadian press reports on India continued to highlight the bizarre, the picturesque or the fantastic in the country, and more frequently presented with editorial comments the dark side—communal riots, superstitious cults and oppressive social customs like child marriage, the caste system and untouchability. The Sikhs had resented very much the biased account the Canadian press had given of India's struggle for freedom under Gandhi. They resented even more its persistent emphasis on India's social evils, particularly



since Sikh society was free of most of these. But what they resented most was the constant implication in the editorials that since poor backward India had to be ruled by some European power, it was fortunate for her that God had selected the British to take up this part of the white man's burden. And this was done with a smugness as unconscious as the laws of nature.

'An American lady, one Miss Catherine Maynard', said Maluka, 'has given a speech against the Hindus in Seattle.'

'What's the bitch barking about?' asked Banta Singh, a militant nationalist, impatiently.

'She says', continued Maluka, 'that the Hindus have horrible social customs. They marry their girls too young, for they prefer to eat their fruit raw. They produce little food, but many children. Early and excessive sex leaves them impotent at twenty-nine'.

The item left the audience tense with a mixture of feelings. Some were amused by the reference to the raw fruit. Some felt that they didn't get enough of the ripe luscious fruit, so tempting with its colour and fragrance, in the New World. But all of them, vigorous *jats* who had wrestled hard and long with the soil of the land of five rivers to make it fruitful, resented most the incomprehensible accusation of impotence at twenty-nine.

Their comments came, precise and pungent, in the picturesque Punjabi idiom.

'How did the miss, the virgin, find that out?' asked one.

'Some miserable rice-eating Madrasi must have tickled her blond bush and made a mess of it,' replied his neighbour.

'I didn't even see a pair of naked legs till after twenty-nine', complained Jugga the Jack, a nickname given to the Sikhs who had cut their hair and wasted their money on whisky and women.

'You have made up aplenty for the early loss, Jack,' said the cook.

'Does she look like a dessicated desert goat or a kicking prairie bronco?' asked Jack.

'No picture,' answered Maluka, both impressed and embarrassed by the richness of the language.

'She is a virgin, Jack, the looks don't matter,' came a voice from the corner.

'Some of these virgins,' commented Jack, 'have the ball-

bearings of an over-worked roller system that rattles without a grip.'

'But dry or luscious, old or young, we must do our duty by Mother India,' said scholarly Gian Chand, surprising everybody with his comment.

'Maluka,' said Fateh Singh in a commanding voice, 'write to the miss to invite her over here. Most of us are around sixty and we wish to testify to the vigour of India.'

'Yes, Maluka', said the cook, 'invite her. A night with Fateh Singh will make her sing the praise of India in her next lecture.'

'We shall pluck her pomegranates with pink buttons softly,' assured Fateh Singh with imagined enjoyment and appropriate gesture, 'caress her curves to melting warmth, and massage her being till her soul shines bright through her eyes.'

IV

For the first time in his life, Maluka lived in a small world of men without women. It was a strange experience, disturbing at first and embarrassing at times, but he soon got accustomed to it. He even learned to appreciate the uninhibited manner of speech and behaviour the Punjabis had acquired in the absence of their women folk. Even in the village the *jats* had expressed themselves in the lively and striking idiom of the soil, enriched by colourful invectives and resounding epithets of abuse, and the ladies of the house within hearing had giggled rather than blushed. But here in British Columbia, the little restraint that the presence of a mother or a sister had exercised was completely gone. Moreover, the educated in the Punjab, largely to display their learning, always interspersed their speech with urbane spineless words from the sophisticated Urdu and Hindi, even English, and this had corrupted the purity and the vigour of the *jat* Punjabi. But in Canada, the *jats* who had become lumber-jacks and loggers not only restored to their language the freshness of the fields, but added to it the crisp vitality of the Canadian woods. The synthesis, at times, was breath-taking. Their way of living reflected a similar trend.

The credit of creating these small Edens without an Eve in

the woods of British Columbia goes to the Government of Canada.

The Punjabis living in the port cities on the Pacific—Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai—where they had worked as watchmen or served in the British Police or the Imperial Armed Forces had probably learned from the Chinese who had already been emigrating to the New World in large numbers, about the riches awaiting hard working men in Canada and the U.S.A. The more adventurous and ambitious among them started coming to British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century, and the early Indian immigration to California was a spillover from B.C. Good news from them encouraged others to follow, and soon the Punjabis began to immigrate directly from India, through trans-shipment at Hong Kong, Shanghai or some other port on the Pacific, as no steamship company ran a direct line from India to the New World. Unable to communicate in English and conspicuous because of their strange appearance and unfamiliar ways, they soon attracted attention, which grew into anxiety and apprehension among the whites on the Pacific Coast. And after 1907, the peak year of Punjabi immigrants into Canada, the vague feelings of dislike and fear were aggravated into active antipathy. This was soon fanned into organised opposition, even open hostility, by a number of dramatic local politicians who built prosperous careers on the skilfull exploitation of the racial slogan of keeping B.C. white, and they pressed Ottawa to take the necessary action to stop the undesirable inflow. As a result, the Indian immigration to Canada was stopped by a clever device, allegedly non-racial, which required certain financial and professional ability and, in particular that immigrants to Canada may land only after making a single uninterrupted journey from the country of their origin. These were also applicable in respect of wife and minor children of Indians already in Canada, and remained in force till after the First World War. Maluka, therefore, rarely met a Sikh boy of his age in 1922 and seldom saw more than three or four Punjabi women in the Sunday congregation at the Sikh Temple in Vancouver.

In the days of their guerilla warfare against the ruling Mughals or the marauding invaders from across the Khyber Pass, the hard-pressed Sikh warriors, owning little more than

a horse, a sword and reckless courage, had created a heroic idiom of speech. Simple unpalatable items of food were given impressive names, and adversity was clothed with a levity of phrase. A man, for instance, was addressed as *fauji* (an army), an ordinary errand was called a *charrhai* (an attack), and one Sikh was spoken of as *sawa lakh* (125,000). In British Columbia, the Sikhs, faced with troublesome situations on the job or stubborn difficulties in the strange social environment, had coined a unique idiom of speech, rather a perversion of the heroic language of the guerilla days.

Independent farmers who had worked hard in their fields, but without any outside control or interference, had now to work in a modern industry, and they resented being driven by callous mechanical forces or by the caprice of over-bearing bosses. And the epithets they had coined to describe different jobs reflected not only the nature of the work involved, but their own attitude towards it.

'Dancing on the finger' meant moving from job to job as directed by the boss, and 'churning the air' was working on top of a high lumber pile. Loading the box cars was 'wrestling with a black woman', and working with smooth lumber in the planer shed was 'massaging the blonde'. Those who worked on the timber skids were 'riding the tiger', and those operating steamrollers were 'circus horses'. The tail-saw man was 'tied to the elephant's penis' and the band-saw feeders 'held the donkey's tail'. Doing easy jobs was described as 'feeding the pigeons', and 'castrating the dogs' meant malingering.

It was at the end of the day that pent-up profanity found its most exuberant expression. Each worker left the mill carrying a block of wood for the kitchen stove or a long piece of cull for the hot-water fire. As they threw down their burdens and brushed the sawdust from their clothing with their hands, abusive comments flew like Christmas greetings. And they were received like familiar endearments.

'Get out of the way, you old bastard' said one, 'you walk like a bull-buffalo at the end of the rutting season.'

'You smell like an exhausted old he-goat,' came the reply, 'get to the bath-house quickly.'

'It was a hard day at the green chain,' complained one.

'The lumber passed through your hands,' came the comment, 'but the way you walk, one would think it went through your ass,'

'Move on, you sonverbitch,' said clean-shaven Jugga, 'you have been in Canada for fifteen years and you can't even say fuck in English.'

'It's more enjoyable in Punjabi, Jugga,' chuckled the man behind him.

'What's the pea-hen moaning about', asked another. 'We always thought you were a woman, and now you look like one. Get the whores to teach you how to powder your face and you needn't sweat in the mill.'

'The old serpents can't change their skin,' said Jugga, 'and they call others naked and shameless!'

Prem Singh was a sensitive man of poetic temperament. Having saved some money, he had gone back to India, married a young wife he loved intensely, but had returned to Canada alone. This was too tempting a target for men without women.

'Fools build houses, Prem,' said one, 'and wise men live in them.'

'Old Sikhs work like horses in Canada, save their money, return to the village, marry a young girl and leave her there—for what?' questioned another.

'But so many of them are doing this now,' said Natha Singh, trying to change the subject, for Prem was finding the pleasantries painful.

'And while their virtuous wives are squeezing their thighs at night with a pillow in their embrace,' said Jugga, 'they would be snoring like the exhausted dancing bears in summer months.'

V

Maluka, a village boy himself, soon learned a great deal about the life and the problems of these simple outspoken villagers from the Punjab, who had left their homes for a distant land to secure a better living. The difficulties they had faced in the New World, together with the racial discrimination, resented more than anything else by these proud people, had made

them stick together in small communities for companionship and warmth of feeling, which they needed to live the customary open-hearted village life sharing much with each other.

Maluka soon got to know them better than they knew each other, for he had to read and write their personal letters, and serve as their interpreter when they had a problem to discuss with the boss, or to visit a doctor or deal with a notary or a bank, even for their ordinary shopping.

The letters they received from home were short and simple, but often written in a poor illegible hand. At times this led to a serious misreading of a word or a phrase by some half-educated person among them.

One evening, after the day's work, Maluka found Teja Singh, normally a jovial carefree man, sitting on the bench by the river like a monument of sadness.

'What's wrong, Teja ?' he asked with concern. 'You look so sad !'

'Mother died,' he replied, his voice choking and barely audible.

'Had she been ill long ?' asked Maluka.

'There is nothing about illness in the letter. Here it is', and he handed the letter to him.

Maluka glanced through it quickly.

'But Teja,' he said with a smile, 'it's not your mother. It's your buffalo that has died.'

Teja was visibly relieved by the clarification, and the tragicomic situation provided the cookhouse with an evening's entertainment. The guilty letter-reader, who had learned his Gurmukhi from the village water-carrier in exchange for green fodder for his goat, faced the ridicule with amazing equanimity. He was accused of other disastrous misreadings, both real and imaginary. He had, said one, misread *havail* (a long heavy necklace of rupee coins) as *havaili* (a cattle shed). And *sagai* (engagement), accused another, as *safai* (elimination or cleanliness). 'A half-educated letter-reader,' said Natha Singh, 'was as dangerous as a half-trained doctor.' Unruffled, the culprit continued to grin impishly, feeling thoroughly satisfied with himself for rendering a free service to his illiterate countrymen isolated in the woods of Canada.

Letter-writing was normally a simple routine job. A man

wanted to have two or three items of news conveyed to his family, and left it to Maluka to make up the letter by adding inquiries about the crops and the cattle, the welfare of relatives and friends and by urging them all to eat well and be strong, and emphasizing the importance of keeping a milking buffalo throughout the year. When Maluka stretched these items out into a smoothly written page and read it out fluently, the common comment was : 'Very good, very good,' and his reputation as a letter writer grew fast. Many of these simple people believed that a letter written by Maluka always brought a quick reply.

Maluka, however, had a difficult man to please in Prem Singh, who wanted to have his letter written in poetry. He was madly in love with his young wife, disconsolate at leaving her in the village, and pining for the day he would be with her.

'Only poetry can convey my love for her,' Prem Singh would say, his large black eyes looking like wells of emotion. 'Only poetry can touch her heart with the joy I wish for her !'

'But Prem, I can't write poetry,' Maluka protested.

'Yes, you *can*, Maluka,' Prem would insist, imploringly. 'Try to feel like me and beautiful words will come to you—warm glowing words, words full of life and love, words that sing with joy !'

It was impossible not to feel the warmth of his love, and Maluka envied the poetic way he spoke.

'And then say in phrases that move like music,' he would continue, 'that my heart longs for you as the river longs for the sea. Say that I think of you always, but I think of you more when the moon is in the sky, for then I know that its soft light is caressing your long black hair, but not with the fondness of my fingers. Say that I think of you in the freshness of the dawn, when its heavenly breath is kissing your closed eyes like lotus buds, but not with the warmth of my lips.'

'Say things like these, Maluka,' he would beg encouragingly, 'you can think of many more—and you can say them better.'

'But I cannot say them like a poet,' Maluka insisted.

'Say them with the depth of my feelings, and your words will have the warmth of my love. And pray to the dark night,

Maluka, to make you a poet. Pray to the silent stars. They will give you the gift of the poet.'

Much embarrassed by Prem's pleas, and not a little flattered, Maluka would agree to make an effort. The mere promise made Prem intensely happy.

Maluka's amateurish attempt at versification of Prem's profound feelings, clumsy in phrase and mushy with sentiment, was greatly admired by Prem. He said it brought him much closer to his wife than he had ever been since he left her. He said it made his heart touch her heart, and made the two feel like one. Prem, in fact, was a poet who couldn't write a word, and Maluka, a writer of routine letters, had been persuaded to imitate the poet in him !

VI

In the evenings, the older men among them loved to tell stories about their early experiences in British Columbia and in California, where several of them had gone in search of jobs in 1907-8. Some of them had the rare gift of the oriental storyteller. They relived their old experiences, strange and amusing, often full of hard struggle and easy misunderstanding, as they related them.

They told of the kindness of many Canadians, in particular, the women who gave them warm clothing when they landed in the cold winter, of the indifference, even hostility of others; and of the amusement of all at their odd appearance and unfamiliar ways. They would recall the fascination of young boys with their belongings, their garments, footwear and musical instruments, and, in particular, with the huge *hookah* with a large brass bowl and long bamboo tubes taped in red which some non-Sikhs had brought with them. 'A talking India machine,' the kids would exclaim giggling, as the *hookah* gurgled warmly with every puff by the turbaned smoker. 'At least we impressed the boys with one machine they thought India had made !' said Natha Singh.

They described their resourceful methods of communicating without knowing any English, their difficulties in securing jobs in industry, of their fights with the prejudiced and resentful whites who at times insulted and abused them and even



resorted to unprovoked violence. 'We didn't always win,' they would say with bravado, 'but we made sure that the fellows wouldn't wish to fight again.'

They talked about the *Komagata Maru* with subdued anger and a sense of defeat, for most of them had watched with a tense feeling the Japanese ship with 376 Punjabi passengers, mostly Sikhs, anchored and cordoned off in the Burrard Inlet for two months and then compelled to return to India with its unwanted immigrants. 'We did everything in our power,' said Natha Singh sadly. 'We held meetings of protest, collected large sums of money, sought justice in the court, appealed for it to the people and Government of Canada, even prayed to the Viceroy of India and His Majesty the King, but to no purpose. All sorts of immigrants from European countries were permitted to land in Canada, but His Majesty's own subjects, splendid-looking men, strong and courageous, many of whom had served the Crown, were not allowed to set foot on His Majesty's soil in the New World !'

'The most harrowing experience of our life,' said Bhai Tara Singh, 'was the parting of the ship. The *Rainbow*, one of the first battleships acquired by the Canadian Navy had its gun trained on it. The harbour was lined with local militia and units of Irish Fusileers and Seaforth Highlanders. Thousands of people watched from the wharves, roofs and windows.'

'And Maluka,' emphasized Banta Singh, 'when the *Komagata Maru* slipped into the ocean on 23 July 1914, after a two-months' stay in the inlet, our loyalty to the British slipped with it.'

'They had even tried to get rid of us who had already been in B.C. for several years,' said Gian Chand. 'In 1908 they tried to persuade us to move to the mosquito-ridden malarial British Honduras. And they tried to influence the Sikh deputation which had gone there to see, but the deputation refused to be corrupted. It advised against moving to Honduras, and we refused to budge.'

'Nor did the *Komagata Maru* story end there,' said Natha Singh. 'It left a trail of murders in B.C. and the feud continued for years in the Punjab. Many returned passengers turned into ardent fighters for India's freedom.'

'Let us not forget those who stood for us,' reminded Ganda

Singh. 'To a crowded meeting of our countrymen in Dominion Hall, the militant socialist Fitzgerald had admonished in a fervent voice : "Get up and arm yourselves and fight to regain your liberty. Inspire your countrymen to return and sweep all the whites from India."

If they talked about the *Komagata Maru* with deep resentment, they spoke of the *Ghadr* (Revolution) with a glow in their eyes.

'In the summer of 1913,' said Banta Singh, 'the Indians living in Canada and the U.S.A. met in Stockton and established an organization. The Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast, which became famous as the Ghadr Party, because of its militant journal *Ghadr*, published in San Francisco.'

'Maluka,' said Ganda Singh, his face beaming with joy, 'it was a thrilling experience to hear Lala Har Dayal, the editor of the *Ghadr*.'

"Away with the petitioning flunkies, India's political leaders," he would say with contempt, "those begging blind bats groping for freedom in the fog of London ! Away with the servile intellectuals of the civil service who sell our birthright for a handful of silver ! And shame on the pompous princelings who dance before the white gods like vulgar *devadasis* richly adorned. Chase away the slave mentality; break the begging bowls ! Have no fear; get rid of your weakness, the battle is to the strong and the brave. Better the chaos which produced Guru Gobind Singh and Sivaji than the peace of the grave imposed by the British bayonets which has produced money-minded middlemen, bootlicking intellectuals and pusillanimous politicians.

"Only you, the working men and the sons of the soil, with calloused hands and courageous hearts, can break the iron chains that bind Mother India. Arise, therefore, with your blood boiling and your hands gripping guns. Discard your religious nonsense; forget your differences of caste and creed. Spitting together, you could drown the British in your spittle. United and armed, no power could keep you in bondage."

They told stories with deep felt joy and a tinge of sadness, about the heroes of the *Ghadr*—Jawala Singh, the rancher; Sohan Singh Bhakna; the youthful Kartar Singh Sarabha;

Bhagwan Singh, the orator; Barkatullah, Santokh Singh, and others.

The motivation of the Ghadr movement was easy to understand; the philosophy behind it very simple. The proud Punjabis in the New World, unable to secure redress for the discrimination they suffered, asked themselves a simple question. What rights can a people expect to enjoy in a foreign country when they had none in their own? So long as India remained subjugated, they concluded, they would continue to be treated as coolies abroad. To free India, therefore, was the basic problem. It was the first task to be undertaken. But how is power to be dislodged? By force, of course. Long ago, Maharaja Ranjit Singh had replied to the Englishman who wanted to know the price of the Koh-i-Noor: 'I got it by the sword; you will get it the same way.'

Maluka enjoyed learning history, warm and fresh, from the mouth of men who had taken part in it. How different from the schoolbooks in which history had been reduced to a desiccated account of remote past events preserved in cold print!

'You must study, Maluka,' they would say, 'and don't get stuck in a lumber mill like us. The saw-dust that falls on your turban now will soon fill the inside of your head.'

'You must study and learn to write, Maluka, you must write our story.'

'Say it like you saw with your eyes. Say it as you heard us speak.'

'Say that we never took a blow without giving one back, no matter how heavy the odds against us. Say that we stood up for India's freedom, not with words but with arms, when India was still hugging its chains—and its leaders begged for petty reforms. Say that we laboured with faith and without fear to brighten the hour of India's awakening. Say that we had the faith to see even in the dark that the daylight was breaking.'

'Say all that, Maluka, and say it with your blood, hot and boiling. We shall be dead and gone, but our children will read it with pride. India will read it and remember.'

Maluka was deeply stirred with what he slowly learned. He much admired the hardy vigour and amazing self-assurance of these simple men from the villages of the Punjab, and even more their amazing political awakening. More than that, to

them, to believe was to act. And what they lacked in knowledge and experience for the fulfilment of their ideal, they made up with an abundance of courage and a fierce will.

'You must study, Maluka, you must learn to write.'

'You must write our story, Maluka.'

'You must study.'

Sometimes Maluka heard these phrases, softly spoken in the silence of the night, when he was half asleep. Sometimes he heard them over the noise and confusion of the mill, shouted like a clarion call to duty, when the perspiration ran down his spine. Occasionally he thought about them when he sat by the Fraser, listening to its smooth flow against the low bushy bank.

VII

'When we had to buy groceries,' said old Dalip Singh, still unable to speak English, 'we pointed to the items, or we carried samples of the things we needed, but it was difficult to do this for milk. And Gurdas, the most resourceful among us, made the picture of a cow as the grocer's wife, her immense bosom heaving rhythmically, stood by watching with amusement. But she couldn't figure out whether we wanted butter or milk. And Gurdas put his loosely closed fists well apart on his chest and made a milking motion with his thumbs. Blushing and giggling, the grocer's wife produced quart bottles of milk from the icebox.'

'Right here,' said Jugga, 'two of our turbaned geniuses, long on the beard and short on English, went up the hill to buy fresh eggs. Not knowing the English word for the hen fruit, one of them bent forward and walked cackling like a hen, and the other dropped smooth white stones off his trouser seat. The ladies were hilarious and gave the eggs free of charge, for, they said, they had never seen before a cackling hen with such a lovely black beard.'

The difficulties they had to face in securing jobs were more serious. They took any odd job that came their way. Many worked cutting brushwood or building the Canadian Pacific Railways, loading flatcars with earth or laying the track at a dollar and a quarter a day. But they preferred a more steady job with



living quarters available on the premises or near by, and industry was reluctant to employ them.

Many Britishers who had served as officers in the Armed Forces in India, were retired with their families in British Columbia, particularly in Victoria and smaller towns on Vancouver Island. They had known the Sikhs in the close intimacy of the battlefield—on the fierce North-West Frontier of India, in the tropical jungles of Burma, on the torrid plateaus of Somaliland, and later even in Flanders and in France. And soldiers in the trenches facing death, or in close combat with gleaming bayonets, develop a comradeship born of proven courage and loyalty sealed with blood. They rise with ease above the differences of race and colour. The Sikhs, therefore, had little difficulty in securing jobs in the industry where a retired British officer or a member of his family was a superintendent or a section boss.

'Mr. Harcourt,' said Natha Singh, 'was born in Peshawar. His father was a captain in a Sikh regiment stationed there. He was superintendent in a big lumber mill on the Fraser beyond New Westminster, and he engaged a large number of Sikhs for the green chain, not without the resentment of white workers. He employed a smaller number of men than normally required for the job, and he selected the best among us. They worked like mad; turbans came off in the rush and confusion, but throughout the day not a piece of lumber was allowed to pass by. The white workers were amazed at their vigour and tenacity. They were even more amazed when the following morning they saw them chewing fresh cedar twigs, with green leaves waving at the end, to brush their teeth. And during the lunch hour in their cookhouse one remark was more frequently heard clear above the chatter: 'By God Charlie! Did you see what those bearded fellows had for breakfast?'

The reputation of the Sikhs as tough lumberjacks soon spread to other mills on the Fraser and the False Creek. Gradually, they were employed in the lumber mills in North Vancouver, Port Moody and further on the Burrard Inlet, and more so on Vancouver Island—in Nanaimo, Port Alberni, Duncan and around Victoria. Many went into the interior as far as Prince George, and to the North to Ocean Falls and Prince Rupert.

'Your army people,' said Ganda Singh provocatively, 'have

always something good to say about the British. They have been very successful in enslaving the minds of their mercenaries.'

'Isn't everybody who works for wages a mercenary?' asked Natha Singh. 'Army has its discipline and soldiers can't blabber like politicians. But it isn't mental slavery, Ganda, that creates loyalty among soldiers; it's the qualities that come out on the battlefield. Men facing danger develop a genuine attachment to each other, for they stand naked with their courage. And the colour of blood is red.'

'The British like their soldiers as the landlords like their work force,' said Ganda. 'The owners have genuine interest in their slaves.'

'You talk much about the unity of the working class, Ganda,' replied Natha, 'and you believe that it will bring heaven on earth. But where is that unity? When the white workers talk about oriental labour, they spout racial hatred. They won't even accept you in their trade unions. And for the moment, there aren't any in the lumber mills, and we can get jobs. The support we get from army officers is genuine. Your dream may come true some day. We hope so.'

VIII

Although the growing logging and lumbering industry in B.C. continued to absorb Punjabi workers in increasing numbers, their difficulties were by no means over. They had, of course, no citizenship rights, municipal, provincial or Dominion. They were, moreover, excluded from skilled and semi-skilled jobs through a gentleman's agreement among the whites. All this they felt was a disgrace they must suffer for having been born in a country conquered and ruled by a handful of whites. But these proud men of independent character found it most excruciating to swallow an insult or accept abuse, let alone unprovoked violence, without retaliation. They had not come to Canada as aided immigrants. The undertaking of a long journey to a strange and distant land required, therefore, that they must have sufficient means and strong motivation; they had to have initiative, ambition and a spirit of adventure far above the average. And these very qualities, so desirable in an immigrant, together with their capacity to work hard and live frugally,

had aroused resentment against them.

Fights, arising out of small irritations on the job, were not uncommon in the early days. On Saturday evenings, when the workers converged into town for diversion, the quiet resentment of the whites often broke out into unprovoked violence in public places such as beer parlours. Occasionally there was a more dramatic performance.

'At Ocean Falls,' said Jugga, 'the Pulp and Paper Mill had employed a large number of us. We were often insulted by small groups of white workers on our way to the mill or back to the bunk house. But out of fear of losing our job we avoided retaliation. One day a group of them stood on the road and it looked as if they were out for trouble.'

"A tough-looking man moved towards us as others watched with amused expectation."

'And Munsha Singh who had been a wrestler in the Army calmly warned us not to interfere unless the others attack first. "I'll handle this one," he said.

"You dirty Hindus!" said Gordie as he was called. "you are spreading the stink all over the country," and punched him in the face.

"Get out of here, you bastards," he said fiercely, "or we'll kick you out," and gave another blow.

'Munsha pulled his muscles like a panther at bay and raised his arms to shield his face. But Gordie was a boxer. He jumped around him on his toes, hitting out when he could.

"Give it to him, Gordie, give it to him," shouted some excited white workers.

"Let him dance about, Munsha," counselled old Harnam Singh, "keep cool, save your breath."

"Man to man," shouted an old white man, fearing the Sikhs were getting ready to join.

"The two continued to spar, Munsha getting the worst of it. But we knew that once Munsha has his powerful arms around him, the dancing would be over. Munsha reached out with lightning speed, held Gordie's right wrist in both hands and pulling his arm with a quick jerk, he knocked his opponent off balance with a blow by his right leg.

'Gordie fell on the ground with a thud. Self-assured Munsha put his foot on him. "Get up, you bastard," he said, "and take

your punishment now."

'No sooner Gordie was up, Munsha reached for his left wrist and holding it with both hands, he bent over in front of him and, with a quick upward swing of his body, flung him several feet away.

'Getting up, Gordie reached for Munsha's board, and this provoked him. He calmly put his arms around him, threw him on the ground and held him there. Bending over Gordie's right leg at the knee, he held it between his own legs and put a double nelson on him.

'With the slightest increase of pressure the pull at the knee and the ankle became unbearable.

'"Say that'll do," counselled Munsha.

'"That'll do, Singh."

Gordie got up, shook hands with Munsha and became quite friendly to us all.'

'Power is virtue,' said the cook, 'weakness is sin.'

'Only weakness is sin,' emphasized Jugga.

'Yes,' agreed Natha Singh, 'all things are given to the powerful and the weak shall lose what little they have.'

'As Waris Shah says,' added Prem, who knew much of him by heart, '*danda* (the stick) rectifies the mischievous and tames the wild; it's a cure for aggression and an inducement to virtue.'

'Until the weak have the *danda*,' said Jugga, 'no God can help them.'

'This was the lesson Guru Gobind Singh taught us,' said Bhai Tara Singh. 'It was the *Khanda* (sword) given to us by him that put an end to Mughal oppression !'

'And now this rabbit-eared bania from Gujarat, our handsome Mahatma, writes that Guru Gobind Singh was mistaken,' said Ganda Singh. 'The virtue of this caricature of a man that the British appreciate most consists in teaching the Hindus to take the blows from the police with their hands folded in front and a prayer in their heart.'

'Pick up a stone, goes a Punjabi saying,' said the cook, 'when you see your enemy with a brick in his hand.'

IX

In 1922 Mahatma Gandhi was in jail, serving a six-year sentence and the Ghadr movement had been crushed within a few months in 1915. Yet both these forces continued to stir people in a muffled manner.

Both of these movements, in spite of their vital differences, had nationalism in common, and nationalism is very partial to the past. The oppressed, it seems, finding little glory in the present, are happy to discover so much of it in their past. Nationalism, both Gandhian and the Ghadr, looked to the past for inspiration. And in India, the source of this inspiration has been religious; even when it is historical, it has religious undertones as in the glorification of Guru Gobind Singh and Shivaji. After the first setback to the national movement, therefore, many national leaders, both Hindus and Moslems, took to communalism, and in time the Hindu Mahasabha and the Moslem League became powerful rivals of the Indian National Congress. The Sikhs, too, had turned to the reform of their Gurdwaras, many of which had large properties bestowed upon them, and the revenue from these was being abused by the priests (*mahants*) who had taken their possession during a period of neglect and indifference by the Khalsa. They were now engaged in the Akali movement, devoted largely to the restoration of the Gurdwaras and their property to the Sikh Commonwealth.

This reversion to old religious ties was also to be noted, even if marginally, in the case of a few Ghadr, although the Ghadr Party itself, after the tragic failure of the abortive revolt in 1915, had turned to communism. Bhai Permanand, after serving long imprisonment in the Andamans for his activity in the Ghadr, reverted in the period of reaction to the communal activities of the Hindu Mahasabha.

All these trends were reflected in the Punjabi community in B.C. which, deprived of all political rights in Canada, was deeply involved in Indian politics. But as it consisted largely of the Sikhs it was preoccupied with the politics of the Indian National Congress, the Ghadr, now fully Marxist, and the Akali movement. It contributed for the support of all these movements, for it believed broadly that all of them were for

the benefit of the people in India. Moreover, in a close-knit community, living, in spite of much quarrelling, in a cooperative spirit, it was impossible for a person to refuse someone known to him personally a financial contribution, even when he had no conviction for the cause.

X

If Maluka learned about the life and the problems of his compatriots in British Columbia through sharing the daily struggle with them, reading and writing their letters, and listening to them talk in the cookhouse, he received his introduction to the New World also through them. It came, not without pathos and humour, through his serving them as an interpreter.

Although they had lived in the New World for many years, much of the old was still fresh in their minds. They thought of it on their job; they talked about it at leisure with romanticized accents; and they never ceased to look forward to its warm embrace again. Many of them, resenting the exacting routine of modern industry, longed for the type of work that had occupied them in the Old World and its vivacious touch of colourful life.

Before leaving his village, Sham Singh had plied a leisurely ox-cart between Hoshiarpur and Jullundur, carrying a variety of merchandise—baskets of colourful and fragrant fruit, mangoes and melons, pomegranates and pears; sacks of cotton and corn and of tiny oil seeds, heavy bales of cloth, silks from Japan, woolens from England and chintz and muslin from Bombay; and immense loads of mountain grass, sugar-cane and fodder. He loved his tall grey pair of powerful Hissari oxen, with beautiful humps and long tapering horns curved back. 'That was a life of work with joy,' he would say wistfully, 'the life for a man like me.' He disliked his work in the mill; feeding the resaw to him was like feeding a monster with a bottomless pit for a stomach, and, hungry or full, it hissed and shrieked all the time for more.

His great ambition was to drive the one horse saw-dust wagon, a job with a lower wage, for he loved to be with an animal. In order to keep a youthful appearance, a great help

in securing jobs, he had trimmed his long beard, his light complexion betraying his excessive zeal in the application of the indelible chemical. Sham Singh was a cheerful man; his hearty laughter, revealing beautiful rows of gleaming white teeth in a rich black frame, warmed up the hearts of men in any gathering. But he stuttered so badly that to hear him talk was to face an embarrassing trial of endurance.

'B-b-b-b-oyee,' said Sham Singh, 'y-y-y-ou must t-t-talk to the b-b-boss for me.'

The present driver of the saw-dust wagon was to retire soon, and Sham Singh believed that if Maluka could explain to the yard boss that he had years of experience as a carter in India, he would get the job.

Charlie Benson, the yard boss, was a busy little martinet, and ran about the yard all day, ordering the men like a drill sergeant. In the evening, however, when he walked with his quiet and gentle wife, pushing the baby pram, he looked very relaxed and often said, 'Hello, boys,' with a smile. Sham Singh felt that Maluka's intercession on his behalf would be more effective if it took place in Charlie's home and in the presence of his wife.

One Sunday morning Maluka accompanied Sham Singh who carried a large box of chocolates elegantly wrapped.

Mrs Benson received the gift with great delight. 'How kind of you,' she said, 'such a lovely box of chocolates!' She asked them to sit down.

'What can I do for you boys?' asked Charlie as he entered the room.

'Sham would like to drive the saw-dust wagon,' said Maluka, 'he has had a lot of experience of this kind of work.'

'But Sham stutters heavily,' replied Charlie surprised and amused at the request. 'He will frighten the hell out of the horse, and the wagon will soon be in the Fraser.'

'N-n-no,' protested Sham Singh, 'I-I-let me try.'

Sham's agony was acute and the moment most embarrassing for all.

'Let the poor fellow try, Charlie,' said Mrs. Benson, 'what's the harm?'

Charlie agreed reluctantly and Maluka was very happy with his success as an interpreter.

And Sham Singh never stutted when saying 'gittup', 'gee', 'haw' or 'who'!

It was not very long before Maluka discovered that many whites in B.C. didn't speak or understand the English language any better than the Sikhs he had to interpret.

Rattan Singh's family in India had owned a herd of cattle. At the mill, too, he kept several cows which grazed during the day in the lush green meadows by the river, and were brought in the evening to a ramshackle barn which he had put up not far from the bunk houses. He not only supplied fresh milk to the cookhouse and to a number of families in the neighbourhood, but loved cattle trading. On Sundays he often asked Maluka to accompany him as an interpreter to Lulu Island.

One bright afternoon, a dull fat German farmer with a red round face and a mouth that looked like a hole in a pumpkin, greeted them with a smile that straightened out his nicotine-stained reddish moustache. 'It's all meat,' said Rattan, 'even the moustache looked like a boiled sausage!'

The German owned a beautiful herd of Holstein cows. Immense animals, with huge udders, they looked, except for their black and white skin and short horns, more like Indian buffaloes than cows.

The farmer spoke little English and understood less. 'Das ist goot cow. Ghives much milch,' he said. And that was the only English sentence Maluka had to interpret. After that the German put his hooked pipe into his mouth and kept it there. But the quality of the handsome animals spoke volumes, as they grazed in contented silence, occasionally flapping their ears or whisking away flies with the bushy black tuft of their long tails. All that remained to be decided for the purchase was the price, and both the illiterate Sikh and the mute German understood that extremely well.

The most educative and enjoyable interpreting that Maluka had to do was for Sher Singh.

Sher Singh, he was told, had a tall straight body before he suffered serious injuries to his back and legs in a mill accident. But now he stood with his body twisted in several places.

As he was no longer able to work in the mill, his friend had

contributed to establish him as a one-man enterprise selling firewood. They had bought for him a half-cord wagon and an old black horse, and equipped him with a pair of heavy black boots and an over-sized khaki woollen suit with shining brass buttons and four tremendous pockets from the Army and Navy Stores. His beard was straggly grey, thin on the sides and long and tapering on the chin. He wore his black turban like a drunken *jat*, its loose end-pieces hanging down to his neck in a care-free manner, and shaking clumsily with the jerky motion of his walk. And he carried a bamboo staff slightly taller than himself.

Apart from droning out, 'Drawee Voood—Vun Dollar,' from his seat on the wagon when passing by a house, he could speak no English and hardly understood anything more than 'yes' and 'no' and 'good' and 'bad'. Often on Sunday afternoons, Maluka had to accompany him on his rounds on the hillside for collecting his dues and getting new orders, at both of which they were very successful.

Maluka was surprised that, in spite of the talk of discrimination he had heard in the cookhouse, they were received by householders without a frown or a gesture of dislike. Many ladies, in fact, looked rather pleased, and Maluka even noticed a gleam of amusement in their eyes. Occasionally, they gave them strawberries which grew plentifully in the gritty soil.

On these rounds Maluka also met several boys of his age—Johnny, Doug, Jack, and Ben—and they were all anxious to talk about India. Open and frank and vivacious, like the boys he had left at home, they conveyed as much with their faces and their eyes as with their tongues. They were greatly amused with the schoolbook English Maluka spoke with a strange accent.

'Do you know what the people say when you go around with Sher?' asked Johnny.

'No, what?' inquired Maluka.

'Here comes the pair—the turbaned Kim and the Hindu Don Quixote!'

This was not the end of it.

Maluka's interpretation for Sher Singh took him to places which he had never seen before. It took him to the local court house.

A couple of sacks of coal, left by the municipal road workers on Marine Drive had disappeared. And some mischievous boys had informed the police that Sher Singh was the culprit.

As Sher Singh took his place in the dock, the prosecutor asked him to take the oath on the Bible. Sher took the open Bible in both hands, touched it respectfully with his forehead and lifted it above his head.

'He has not kissed the Bible, your honour', objected the prosecutor.

Sher Singh was shocked when Maluka interpreted the objection to him, for to the Hindus that would be a sacrilege. Sher Singh stood confused and troubled.

'They want you to kiss it properly,' clarified Maluka.

Sher Singh stuck out his tongue, held the Bible open in front of him, and licked the page from bottom to top.

'Are they happy now?' he asked.

The sombre atmosphere of the small courthouse brightened somewhat and, with the slimy assurance that Sher Singh would speak the truth, the proceedings for justice continued.

'What time did you return home on Friday night?' asked the prosecutor.

'He has no watch. He couldn't read it if he had one. How can he tell you the time he returned?' replied Maluka.

'Your business', rebuked the judge sharply, 'is not to enlighten the court nor to argue with the prosecutor. You are here to interpret only.'

'Yes, your honour,' replied the humbled and embarrassed Maluka.

The case was soon over, for there wasn't even a stove for burning coal in the little shack where Sher Singh lived.

'Not guilty,' pronounced the judge.

Maluka, in spite of the rebuke he received, felt proud of himself.

There was a celebration in the cookhouse in the evening. The workers at the mill, always anxious to find an occasion for celebration, rejoiced noisily, whisky adding to the exuberance, for the court had established the innocence of the Hindu Don Quixote!

XI

On Saturday noon silence descended on the mill for the weekend. The workers had time to wash their hair and clothing, clean the bunk houses, visit friends or go shopping. Most of them sought the pleasure of their choice on Saturday night and attended the Sunday afternoon service at the Vancouver Sikh Temple.

On Saturday afternoon the Sikhs were conspicuous on Hastings and Granville Streets, for they walked leisurely in groups, often pausing to admire the attractive display of goods and clothing in the shop windows. They greeted other groups of Sikhs from other mills with great enthusiasm; their loud '*Sat Siri Akal*' (God is true) and '*Ki Hal eh*' (How are you?) attracted much attention. And as they stood in groups completely absorbed in their conversation laced with hearty laughter, energetic pedestrians pressed for time, elbowing their way through them or skirting around them, looked askance and annoyed. This embarrassed Maluka. But he was even more embarrassed when he himself received their amused glances because of his ill-fitting suit, creaking black shoes and bright pink turban.

Maluka thought of Noor Din, a Muslim of the *mirasee* caste, who normally earn their living as messengers and entertainers. Although he had served only as a tailor's assistant in the Army, he had established the reputation of a head tailor back home, claiming that he had fitted hundreds of Sahibs before they went home for a holiday.

'*Chaudrani*', he would say to Maluka's mother, 'my work is known and admired even in London!'

He had made the suit out of heavy dark woolen cloth using sturdy brown lining and padded the chest with cotton to keep the lungs warm in the cold climate.

The suit was tried several times. Each time, beaming with satisfaction, his hands open before him in a 'you see' gesture, Noor Din would say: '*Sahib log* in Amreeka will stop to watch your son.'

'The glib *mirasee* has proven himself to be right,' Maluka would say to himself under his breath.

As the afternoon progressed the Punjabis drifted toward their rendezvous—in the C.P.R. station, the General Post Office,

certain corners on Main Street and the beer parlours behind Hastings Street.

In the evening, they dispersed, each in pursuit of his particular amusement.

Some, it was said, preferred Italian wine and olive-tinted women with gorgeous 'curves and shimmering black curls; some sought whisky-soda in the company of tall blonde women with the blue of the hills in their eyes and the music of the caravans in their body; and some were happy with tortillas and tamales and the warm brown women of sunny climes with passionate red lips and expressive little hands. Some, without turbans, went for a haircut and a shave by female Japanese barbers, stubby and flat-chested, but famous for their tactile skill. Some disappeared in Pender Street, where gambling tables and rice wine was plentiful and a plug of sticky black opium could be purchased with discretion.

Many, the very religious, stayed at the mill. 'They are good pious people,' said Natha Singh. 'They are the stingy ones,' said Jugga, 'and enemies of nature. When they get hold of a coin they hang on to it till the figure on its face wears off.'

But Mehra belonged to neither of these groups. A tall, wiry man with a long bushy moustache and shaven beard, he had come from a family in Gujranwala that bred horses. He couldn't live without a horse, and had purchased two young bay colts, so that they wouldn't feel lonely. They were fully grown now. Brushing, cleaning and exercising them took all his spare time, and feeding them absorbed most of his money. On returning from the job, he rushed to the paddock and the neighing beautiful animals greeted him with equal affection. One day Maluka saw him holding his paycheck in front of them, and heard him say: 'That's all I've got. How much for you, how much for me?' The horses nickered. 'Yes, yes,' he replied, 'you will get the bigger share, you rascals!'

'Maluka,' said Mehra, 'I need more money for my horses. Could you explain it to the boss and get me more overtime work?'

Occasionally the joy of nature was brought to the door of the mill workers.

— On Saturday afternoon, when some of the men were engaged in sports—weight-lifting and club-swinging—on the saw-dust

plot between the cookhouse and the bunk sheds, a man arrived with two buxom young ladies, with lavish make-up and heavily scented hair falling on their shoulders.

'You can stop your weight-lifting now,' said Jugga, 'a more enjoyable sport is waiting.'

The ladies joined the men in their sports and challenged them to touch the edge of the cookhouse roof with their toes. And they did it, holding open beer bottles in their hand, with great ease, revealing at the same time the glowing flesh of their long shapely thighs between colourful garters supporting black silk stockings and white frilly panties.

Soon they vanished into rooms arranged for them, and the man with the pink silk shirt and gaudy necktie, vaselined black hair parted on the side and a fat oily face, sat in the cookhouse sipping whisky.

Out of a small group outside, men left one after the other, and only Ram Lal sat dejectedly puffing at his little hookah made by fitting two bamboo tubes into the mouth of a milk bottle.

'He is the last to go,' said Jugga, 'for he is ceaseless. They say he has practised the *Vama Marga* of the Tantric mysteries. But I think it is the opium pill used with skill.'

XII

Early Sunday morning a dignified man with a white goatee and a pensive look, carrying a black attaché-case in one hand and a walking stick to match in the other, approached the cookhouse. He was the Christian missionary, Mr MacGovern from Vancouver.

'Providence be praised,' said Jugga, 'salvation comes the morning after the night of sin. The girls gave joy without racial discrimination. Would the custodians of God's grace be as enlightened?'

'The Almighty has put Sunday in the right place in the week,' observed Banta Singh. 'Stains are easy to wash while still fresh,' he added thoughtfully.

'You mustn't make fun of others' religion,' admonished Natha Singh, 'the Sikh gurus never claimed a monopoly of truth. They did not claim, like some prophets, that they were

telling what God had said to them. They showed a path to righteous living to be followed individually and collectively in the daily life. Truth is one, but paths to it are many.'

'Yes,' said Bhai Tara Singh, 'even our prayer (*ardas*) is not the creation of one man, and no priest is needed to address it. It highlights our struggle, but the suffering is recounted without bitterness and the triumphs without pride. We promote our faith, but we respect that of others. We pray that *all* men may prosper by Thy grace.'

'Will you receive Mr MacGovern in the cookhouse, Maluka,' requested Natha Singh, 'and offer him some tea?'

Mr MacGovern sipped his tea slowly out of a huge enamelled iron cup and exchanged civilities with those present in the cookhouse. A few more came from the bunk houses to hear him.

The missionary had a kind face with a tinge of sadness. Was it because the best of life had gone and the ideal he had served was far from fulfilment? It seemed that his large blue eyes had seen much and the soft light in them revealed a patient understanding of fellowmen. He spoke with a gentle voice in a kind of Hindustani which made the Punjabi ears laugh, but they heard him respectfully.

In the manner of the East, he spoke in parables, for moral truths are easier to convey through the suggestiveness of a story than through a didactic sermon. He told the parable of the Sower and of the Tares, easily understood by the *jats*. 'One can only sow the seed,' he emphasized, as hope mingled with concern in his voice, 'and many things can interfere with their growth and the ultimate yield.'

'It is like the teaching of Gautam Buddha and Guru Nanak,' said Natha Singh. 'The world would be happier if men lived by it.'

'The sages the world over have repeated the same thing,' came a voice.

'It was the same Spirit that spoke through them all,' observed another.

'But how do you explain, Mr MacGovern,' asked Ganda Singh, 'that people whose religion preaches mercy and peace and love, have managed to conquer the entire world and continue to exploit it with the blessings of their churches?'

'Those who have conquered by the sword and continue to exploit the weak are not following the teachings of our Lord,' replied Mr MacGovern.

'It is frightening to think,' said Jugga, 'that if we became Christians we shall be sharing Heaven with people who would continue to discriminate against the non-whites till eternity. Here in Canada we have no civic rights and we hate to think that we shall have none in Heaven either!'

'There is much that is unjust in our society,' agreed Mr MacGovern. 'We can only preach and persuade in the name of our Lord and try to live up to his teaching.'

'Christianity', said Gian Chand, 'was an oriental religion and Christ was a Jew, but the white people paint him to look like a nordic god with blue eyes and blond hair.'

'I suppose,' replied the missionary with a faint smile, 'people wish to make their Saviour look like themselves!'

This was the first time Maluka had heard a Christian preach his religion. In India, he, like other boys of his village, knew only one Christian—an ebony-coloured untouchable from Madras who always wore a white linen suit and a white solar hat, and served as watchman of the Whiteman's Cemetery on the road to Hoshiarpur. Nobody envied him. What fun was there in living like a ghost of a graveyard, immaculately dressed and supremely idle!

The people of the village were religious in spirit without following their faith in any organized and systematic manner. In the Punjab villages, so often overrun by the marauding horsemen out of the mountains in the North-West, the *jats*, who cultivated their fields with their swords hanging from the waist, dominated those pursuing other occupations. Here the Brahmin and the Mullah who exercised powerful influence in other parts of India, were called upon, like other groups who served the *jats*, to perform the necessary religious services at birth, marriage or death. The Hindu temple, built with tiny red bricks long ago, was half in ruins, and when the Brahmin blew his conch shell at vesper time, the Hindus muttered *Hare Ram* like an old habit. No daily call to prayer was heard from the small white-washed mosque; the Mullah made an effort, appreciated only by a few boys, to teach the reading of the Quran.

The Sikhs had no Gurdwara, although a few ardent followers kept the *Granth Sahib*, their sacred anthology, in their homes and had it read often. Out in the vast stretch of green fields stood the crumbling walls of an old Sikh fort; its faded murals, depicting Guru Nanak in meditation, Guru Gobind Singh on horseback with a sword in one hand and a hawk perched on the other, and a furious charge by the Sikh cavalry, quietly reminded the Sikhs of the turbulent days of their history.

Long before daybreak, when the gurgling sound of the churners mingled with the drowsy grind of the hand mills and the booming beat of the carder's bow, Khem Singh, the carpenter would start the recitation of the *Japji* (the morning prayer) in a rich loud voice that reverberated through the village. As ploughmen yoked their oxen, they would remark that the carpenter had already awakened the Almighty. 'The way Khem Singh shouts his prayer at Him,' they said, 'one would think that God had gone deaf.'

'The prayer was delivered like punishment!' they added, laughing, 'It is the Punjabi method of persuading the All-Powerful!'

Maluka, like several other boys in the Sikh households, knew the thirty-eight stanzas of the *Japji* by heart. He loved to hear its rich music at the ambrosial hour (*Amrit Vela*) of the dawn, even if he didn't understand its full meaning, for the morning prayer of the Sikhs conveys the essence of their religion. And to hear the same prayer every morning on the banks of the Fraser was a great joy to him.

There is one God, the Supreme Truth—without fear, envy,
or hate is He;

Before time He was, and what remains when time has run
its course, is He.

They cannot know Him who reason alone employ, or medi-
tation or fasting;

He is known to those of the righteous deed, their ego con-
quered through faith everlasting,

Words cannot describe Him, nor mind grasp, nor eyes see,
But a heart that feels His presence is a haven of joy and
sorrow-free.

2. The School

MALUKA was a school dropout. It was the stimulus provided by his illiterate countrymen in British Columbia that made him go back to school.

In December 1920 Mahatma Gandhi had come to the Punjab to promote the non-violent non-cooperation campaign against the British Government. He advocated the boycott of British goods and institutions, including the schools, which, he said, had instilled a slave mentality.

Much water had flown down the rivers in the Punjab since Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the Governor, had crushed the Ghadr movement in 1915. The war to save democracy for the world had been won; India's aspirations for a share of its blessings effectively thwarted; suppressive legal measures adopted; and the 'natives' taught a lesson through the Amritsar massacre. And he was still there to show that where the strong rule obedience is best, little dreaming that in time he too was to receive the wages of sin through the pistol of a Punjabi in London. But Sir Michael and the impregnable imperial might were now faced with a different phenomenon. A saint had arisen to defy Caesar and millions rose to join him. The very soul of India was now in revolt; its success was no longer doubted, for the conviction had grown that the Government, having betrayed its *Dharma*, was drifting fast to its doom. And a quiet assurance came from the crumbling ruins of old empires that those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad.

The day the Mahatma was to pass through Maluka's village, people from near and distant hamlets had started with the dawn to gather along the road from Jullundur to Hoshiarpur for a *darshan*—a communion of their souls with the Great Soul, the Mahatma, in silence. All the denominational schools in Hoshiarpur—the Islamia, the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharam—were closed for the day. Only the Government High School had insisted that the staff and the students must keep out of mischief and attend to the business of education as usual.

As Maluka and his village schoolmates walked the three miles to the school through happy crowds in eager expectation, they felt a sense of futility in their pursuit of learning. The vast exhilarating tide of old and young, women and children, surging towards Swaraj, tugged at their hearts.

The bright sun rose high in the clear blue sky and the chilly atmosphere of the school warmed up a little, but the silence remained ominous. The headmaster of the school was a learned Anglo-Indian; he dressed like a Sahib and ruled like a martinet. In the heavy silence he sensed a suppressed rumble of storm, and he rushed about in the long, wide verandas swishing his cane. But the exaggerated assertion of authority betrayed a lack of assurance. The teachers appeared to be busy teaching, and the students, their books open in front, looked out through the windows.

Soon the students from the other high school arrived with a band. Many stood on the low school boundary walls and shouted repeatedly :

Leave the cage. Fight for freedom.

India calls ! The Mahatma calls !

Most of Maluka's class-fellows were *jat* boys from the neighbouring villages; they didn't need school education to earn a living. They were, in fact, better at sports than in studies, and enjoyed the rough and tumble of life in the fields more than the quiet and systematic acquisition of book knowledge. And the headmaster had rightly suspected trouble to break out in that class.

More students joined the crowd outside and the calls to freedom became louder. Within the school, the atmosphere became more tense, and the boys in Maluka's class more restless. They left their seats and looked out impatiently from the windows.

The headmaster rushed into the room.

'Sit down !' he shouted.

All took their seats. They resented the stern command, but obeyed out of habit, and they felt not a little ashamed of their unthinking obedience.

'Who among you wishes to leave the school ?' he asked

fiercely. 'I want him to stand up.'

In the oppressive silence the boys looked at each other, partly in fear and partly for encouragement, but none stood up.

'If no one stands up,' he added triumphantly, 'I want you to continue with your lesson in a disciplined manner. Pay no heed to the rowdies on the road barking out nonsense.'

Provoked by the challenge and annoyed by the insulting references to the students from other schools, Maluka rose slowly from his seat, his heart pounding, and stood up holding the edges of his desk firmly in his hand.

'So you wish to leave?' asked the headmaster threateningly.

'Yes, sir', replied Maluka, and the affirmation relieved the tension in his body.

'Did you ask your parents for their permission?'

'No, sir.'

'Did you ask your class teacher?'

'No sir.'

'My cane has the permission to correct you.'

One, two three...the strokes came hard and fast.

With lightning speed his classmates leaped out of the low windows, shouting, 'Come out, come out,' to join the exuberant crowd of students on the road. The band struck up a martial tune. In a few minutes the entire school was empty.

II

'It was foolish of Gandhi to call the boys out of the school,' said Ganda Singh. 'What were they to do?'

'It was a mistake', agreed Gian Chand, 'but Gandhi was consistent.'

'Consistently foolish!' jibed Ganda.

'The *jat* boys never liked the school,' observed the cook shrewdly, 'and Gandhi gave them a patriotic reason for leaving it.'

'And I am told,' added Banta Singh, 'that they persuaded, even forced, the good Brahmin and Khatri students to leave. Is that right, Maluka?'

'Well,' confessed Maluka with a faint smile, 'many among us felt that if some bright boys can't see straight with Gandhi,

their vision needs to be corrected.'

'So you boys used violence to get the unwilling students out, so that they may practice non-violence with Gandhi,' chuckled Gian Chand, himself a Khatri. 'There's *jat* logic for you!'

'At least the schoolboys got the benefit of the freedom movement right away,' added Jugga, 'and poor India is still waiting.'

'Anyway, you didn't lose much time, Maluka', consoled Banta Singh. 'And you've gained a lot. You saw a great man. You heard him speak. You felt the glow of a great burning. The school would mean more to you now.'

'But you must go back to school,' emphasized Gian Chand.

'Yes, you must, Maluka,' added Natha Singh softly, 'or you'll become an ignorant beast of burden like us.'

The summer holidays were coming to an end, and Maluka began to think about the school. The three young boys, who had taken jobs in the planer mills, had already left. They had to help with fruit picking at home.

The colourful season of fruitfulness had indeed begun. The tall rows of raspberry canes were wine red at the tips, and the gooseberry bushes had more fruit than leaves. The plums had ripened purple-blue and reddish-yellow; the pears were turning pale and the apples deep red. Across the Fraser on Lulu Island, the rectangular fields of barley and oats looked like bright patches of gold on a quilt of green. The days were still warm, but the evenings brought a touch of the autumn, and an odd yellow leaf parted sadly from the poplars.

The mellow days of soft sunshine, like early winter days in the Punjab, when the sugarcane sweetened and the citrus fruit harvest gleamed yellow and orange on the round green trees, made Maluka very happy. The thought of going back to school made him happier still.

'It'll be good to join the Kitslano High School,' advised Natha Singh. 'It's not far from the Gurdwara. Many of our people live in that area, and you can stay with them.'

'A beautiful beach is nearby,' added the cook, 'and you can walk across Granville bridge to the heart of the city.'

'And you'll be able to listen to *Gurbani** regularly at the

* The voice or the word of the Guru.

Gurdwara,' said Bhai Tara Singh ardently, 'and meet many good people.'

'And when you wish to see us,' observed Prem wistfully, 'the interurban car will bring you here in half an hour.'

Soon after the schools opened Maluka presented himself at Kitslano High.

The principal, a neatly dressed energetic man of medium size with sharp features, received him with half-concealed surprise.

'Let me see your school certificate,' he asked authoritatively, and his thin lips closed tight as he examined the creased document.

'It seems,' he observed hesitatingly, 'that you are qualified to join grade X.'

The coldness of his words widened the distance between the two.

'How long have you been here?'

'Five months, sir.'

'And what have you been doing?'

'Working in a lumber mill.'

'Don't you like your work?'

'I do, sir, but I'd like to finish my schooling.'

'Well, you are the first Sikh boy to come to this school. Do you think you'll pull along with the students?'

'I shall do my best, sir.'

'Come with me to the class teacher,' he said with a sharp gesture as he got up from his chair.

The class teacher, a balding man of mild manners, looked very surprised to see a turbaned teenager wanting to join the school. He too felt that Maluka's qualifications were in order, but doubted whether he would find it easy to make the necessary adjustments.

The interview, conducted more like a police inquiry than an educational guidance session, crowned with doubt, made Maluka feel very uneasy. He wondered whether he was really wanted there.

Suppressing his feelings, he followed the principal through the quiet corridor, the classroom doors closed on both sides, to his office. He felt very confused and not a little dejected. Wouldn't it be better to have the confusion cleared even if it

meant a greater dejection? He didn't understand things in the New World too well, but he understood his feelings thoroughly. And his lack of knowledge made him rely more upon his courage.

'Would you be glad to have me in the school, sir?' he ventured to ask the principal, looking him full in the face.

'Not particularly,' came the clipped reply, and the plastic face remained immobile.

Maluka had no desire to join Kitslano High School.

Depressed in spirit, his heart turbulent, he decided to walk back to the small wooden interurban car station on False Creek at Granville Bridge via the Sikh Temple on Second Avenue West. Soon he was able to see from a distance the familiar *Nishan Sahib*, the yellow Sikh flag bearing the militant emblem—swords crossed around the *chakra*—in black, fluttering on a white mast over the roof of the Gurdwara.

The sight of the flag stirred him and he walked more energetically, hardly noticing the pedestrians on the cement sidewalk. Many episodes from Sikh history flashed through his mind.

Yes! under this flag the Sikhs had shown amazing courage in adversity. Holding it high, they had often challenged the dark fate and fought it to victory. What determination it had aroused! What a spirit of sacrifice!

Soon he was at the Gurdwara. He walked up the high flight of broad steps to pay homage to the *Granth Sahib*, for Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last guru of the Sikhs, had ordained, to guard against personality cults, that after him the Scripture was to be the only guru of the democratic *Khalsa* for all times. All guidance and inspiration, all that was needed to strengthen faith and galvanize courage was to be found in it.

There appeared to be nobody in the Gurdwara. The *Granthi* (Priest) was in fact considered more like a caretaker than a scholar versed in the musical reading of the Scripture and its meaningful interpretation. Guru Gobind Singh, moreover, had also abolished priesthood among the *Khalsa*, so that any knowledgeable Sikh could take charge of the religious service and lead the congregation in prayer.

Maluka took his shoes off and entered the large carpeted

hall, its papered walls decorated with pictures of the Sikh gurus and the heroes of their history. He walked to the high platform which held the *Granth Sahib* covered by a large silk handkerchief under a colourful canopy. He bowed before it on his knees and touched the white sheet, stretching from the platform on to the carpet, with his forehead. Obeisance done, he stood up in front, and, feeling its purifying presence, his hands folded, his eyes closed, he prayed for faith and courage. Alone in the hall, he was no longer lonely as he had often felt on the crowded streets. His spirit refreshed, he found greater strength within himself.

On leaving the Gurdwara, he continued to walk, the head held high and the step firmer, on Second Avenue, in the direction of the interurban car station. Soon the cement pavement came to an end; on the board sidewalk he had to watch his step, for in many places the loose old boards were half sunk into the earth. The wooden houses on both sides looked old and shabby. It was here and in the neighbourhood stretching towards False Creek, where numerous lumber mills operated noisily, that the Sikh workers lived in small cooperative groups.

It was oppressively quiet in the area for men were at work and only a few ill-clad white children played on the street. A lady in a bright coloured ankle-length dress, patterned loosely on the frock, and a white *dupatta* half covering her head, grazed a jersey cow in an open plot between the houses. Not far, on the opposite side, a messy little store, its paint peeling, displayed a pretentious signboard: India-Canada Trading Co. An old Ford truck, the only vehicle on the road, bearing the same fading designation, was parked in front.

Puran Chand, its Brahmin proprietor who had married a tall graceful Negro woman, sat behind the counter littered with empty soda water bottles. He was busy preparing grocery bills in illegible Urdu. Around him partially-filled gunny sacks leaned against each other clumsily; rolled down at the mouth, they displayed a variety of Indian pulses—*moong* and *mash* and *massar*—quality rice from the East and California beans. On the dusty shelf against the wall stood glass jars of pepper and cinnamon, coriander and cardamom, turmeric powder and *garm massala*, his proud preparation.

Maluka knew him well, for he supplied groceries to the

cookhouse at the lumber mill, where Maluka served as one of the five 'caterers' and as the main accountant. He was a handsome genial man of great intelligence, but the people at the mill had a variety of reservations about him.

'You have to watch the Brahmin,' the cook would often say, 'for he'd palm off second-rate stuff and soak you through the nose.'

'It's difficult to check his tricks, for he makes his bills illegible,' said one of the 'caterers'.

'He has a fat bank account, but always complains that he's on the verge of bankruptcy,' said Banta Singh, 'and he knows how to exploit the national sentiment to push his business.' 'You are my customers,' he says, feigning meekness, 'my brothers from India. It's a joy for me to serve you. You can't refuse me this privilege.'

In spite of all that Maluka had heard against him, he liked the Brahmin grocer. He had, in defiance of the rigid customs of the Old World and the strict taboos of the New, quietly married a Negro woman, which no Sikh had so far ventured to do, despite the guru's emphatic injunction against the restrictions of caste, creed or colour. He was a man of enviable equanimity; in the cookhouse, he parried harsh words with a smile, and even when abused by a half-drunk lumberjack he remained unruffled. In the tradition of his caste, he respected knowledge, and he fed his mind with good books.

'*Panditjee Maharaj, namaskar,*' greeted Maluka as he entered the store.

'*Namaskar, Maluka. It's good to see you. Take a seat.*' What can I offer you,' he asked as Maluka took a chair.

'Nothing, *Panditjee, Mehrbani.*'

'Let me give you some cashew nuts.'

'Please don't trouble.'

'No trouble, Maluka, the jar is right here.' And he put a handful of nuts on the plate and opened two soda water bottles.

'How is everybody at the mill? And how is your work?'

'Quite well, *shukria.*'

'Are you joining Kitslano High?'

'No.'

'Didn't they accept you?'

'I don't think I am wanted there,' replied Maluka with some bitterness.

'Don't take it too hard, Maluka. There's a lot of prejudice against our people in this area.'

Puran Chand knitted his brow and looked out through the dull show-window pane.

'Why don't you try King Edward?' he continued. 'I know a teacher there. I supply him with curry powder and *garm massala*. He loves India. He'd be glad to help you.'

'*Mehrbani, Panditjee*. I'll talk to you later about it. I must return to the mill now.' And Maluka got up to leave.

'Wait a minute, Maluka,' said Puran Chand with a persuasive smile. 'I have some books for you. *Ghadri-di-Goonj* (Revolutionary Echo) Number One and Two, and a collection of poems by Iqbal. You'll love them.'

'So you've been to the Kitslano High,' said Jugga as he entered the cookhouse, 'and they didn't care to have you. Let me tell you why.'

'Never mind, Jack,' interrupted the cook, 'we know why.'

'The school is too close to the Hindu ghetto,' persisted Jugga. 'In the dirty old houses they live crowded like cattle. And for free entertainment they go to the Kitslano beach and dig their eyes into the flesh of bathing beauties. They know the curves of everyone of them by heart. People resent that.'

'Come, Jack,' said Banta Singh, 'they only go to warm up their eyes a little. It's an innocent pastime.'

'If the women display in public what's private,' observed Gian Chand, 'is it sinful for the public to look and admire?'

'But why go to the Kitslano School?' asked Sher Singh, his grey beard rising pointedly as he raised his arm in protest. 'What's wrong with the school on Fraser Street? People are nice around here. Maluka has already made friends with several boys. The girls are pretty as flowers. They smile when they speak. And he can stay right here with us.'

'The old carters are known for their common sense,' said Natha Singh. 'We can build a shack for him on the river bank with a veranda in front and heating stove inside.'

'I'll buy him a bicycle,' said Ratan Singh. 'and he can earn pocket money delivering milk on the way to the school.'

'And he won't starve here,' added Arjan Singh. 'Anybody looking at you fellows would agree that you have a good cook.'

III

John Oliver High School, a modest, two storey wooden building, stood half a block off Fraser Street, near the South Vancouver City Hall. The playground behind it was enclosed by a board fence, hidden on one side by thick brushwood. On the opposite side of Fraser Street, the large patch of brushwood looked like a miniature forest.

The principal of the school, Jake Palmer, a kind scholarly man, and the different teachers were most helpful with their advice and encouragement. Maluka had never studied French, neither Canadian nor European history, and his knowledge of the English language left much to be desired. It was decided, therefore, that he would be better off in Grade IX. And the two years he spent under the guidance of stimulating teachers laid a sound foundation for his future education.

The first Sikh boy to be seen in the area, Maluka aroused much curiosity, but it was never allowed to exceed polite interest. He was warmly received in the school, and the small shops on Fraser Street served him with more than customary solicitude.

'Hello, sheikh, hello, sheikh,' the boys and the girls greeted him with friendly smiles.

Maluka took this to be a forgiveable mis-pronunciation of 'sikh' and appreciated it as a respectful compliment to his religion.

Months had passed before he discovered that the nickname had resulted from a mistaken identity with Rudolf Valentino, a turbaned movie star with dark dreamy eyes, and famous for the role of an enchanting lover in exotic films with an oriental setting.

It was much too late to get rid of the romantic nickname, but Maluka was anxious to see the celebrity who had been the cause of it, on the screen.

Roxy, a picture house on Hastings Street, displayed huge posters in bright colours—lonesome Valentino in a grove of crescent-lit palm trees; romantic Valentino holding a ravishing

damsel, reckless Valentino with a gleaming dagger; pensive Valentino thwarted by a momentary obstinacy; persuasive Valentino on the verge of triumph; passionate Valentino on velvet cushions.

All this and more, for only two bits !

Maluka approached the glass cubicle to buy a ticket. Inside, a blond with heavy make-up, her curls cascading to the shoulders and her powdered breasts oozing out of a tight black dress, looked bored with show business.

'One ticket, please,' said Maluka as he put his two-bit piece on the tiny window-counter.

'You have to take your turban off to get in,' she said impudently.

'Have you ever seen a Sikh take his turban off to enter a public place ?' asked Maluka surprised and irritated.

'With that turban,' she asserted curtly, 'you can't get in. That's a cinch.'

'But Valentine is wearing a turban,' insisted Maluka, 'and he is very much in.'

'Ah,' she said dreamily, revealing ugly, nicotine-stained teeth, 'Valentine can do anything he likes.'

'Danger' was Maluka's second nickname.

Rattan Singh, true to his promise, had bought for him an old rattling bicycle and, as an accompaniment, he gave him a bright red woolen sweater. Excited by the new acquisitions, Maluka pedalled hard and disdained using the brakes on the slopes. This was reckless coming down the steep cobble-stone incline on Fraser Street before it joined Marine Drive, and the pedestrians on the board sidewalk watched apprehensively, shouting : 'Danger ! Danger !'

Maluka's first nickname was a free gift: the second he had earned. The first began to wear off with time, but the second was confirmed when, two years later, he played grass hockey for the University of British Columbia.

Both the boys and the girls had endless questions to ask. The boys were interested in verifying the stories they had heard about India—stories about the fire-eating *fakirs*, the ascetics lying on a bed of nails and holy men with hypnotic

powers; stories about the rope trick, the snake charmers, and the magicians who grew a mango tree in a few minutes' time.

Not having been accustomed to studying in a coeducational school in the Punjab, Maluka fought shy of the girls and avoided lengthy conversations with them. This, in fact, made them more inquisitive, and he felt embarrassed by their excessive attention. During the absence of the teacher and in the recess period, they would gather around him in the class room and ask him to write their name in *Gurmukhi* and *Urdu*, to tattoo it on their forearms, or stretch out their hands to know what the future had in store for them.

One day, Rose Thompson, the red-head gangleader, glanced at the group with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, and looked at Maluka with a straight serious face.

'Maluka,' she asked in a low voice, 'are you a girl or a boy?'

A vigorous *jat* boy from the Punjab, Maluka was shocked to hear his manhood doubted. A pert little girl dubious about his sex! What insolence! What an insult!

For a moment he was speechless and he invoked the proud earth of the Punjab for help. Soon the spirit of the land took possession of his tongue.

'Girls,' he asserted before he was fully aware of what he was saying, 'I am a boy and *not* a girl. If you have any doubt, I am going to show you my certificate!'

The giggles couldn't hide the blushes.

The delightful presence of girls in the class was the most striking contrast with the schools in India. It made life in the school more natural and wholesome. The girls, almost half the class, sat in separate rows from the boys. With their blooming fresh faces and their beautiful long hair—black and brown and auburn and red—held together by colourful ribbons tied into bows or combed neatly into buns, they added grace and animation to the atmosphere. Their coy manners, teasing looks and ready smiles both stimulated the boys and exercised restraint upon them. And Maluka was surprised to find that most of them were better at studies than the boys, particularly in languages, literature and history. Overcoming his shyness, he learned to adjust himself to the congenial and colourful new environment.

IV

Of all the problems he had to face, the most embarrassing and pressing was the problem of lunch.

The regular lunch at the cookhouse—battered *chappatis*, meat or vegetable curry and seasoned *dal*, only a little thicker than the thick soup was difficult to carry and clumsy to manage in public. Maluka, therefore, purchased a few buns and biscuits at the small bakery shop on Fraser Street, but they neither appeased his hunger nor satisfied his taste.

'How can you eat that soggy dry stuff every day,' asked the cook, 'you will soon grow soft and fat like the buns.'

'And if you ever come here after taking a beating from any of the school boys,' warned Jugga, 'you will get another one from us.'

'Arjan Singh will make some *pinnies* for you,' suggested Natha Singh. 'They are rich and tasteful. They'll put vigour into you. And they are easy to carry.'

The cook fried some wheat flour in clarified butter till it became brown and added crushed nuts, almonds and pistachios, raisins and chopped dates. Into the mixture he poured boiling sugar water and continued to stir until it reached the consistency required for rolling into large balls.

The *pinnies* were delicious and soft when fresh, but in the freezing weather they soon became hard as baseballs and acquired a dark ominous look. And Maluka's problem was no nearer a solution.

At noon, the boys sat in groups at some warm place and opened their neatly packed lunches of assorted sandwiches and home-made cakes. As they got busy eating and chatting, Maluka left quietly and slipped into a convenient patch of brushwood to negotiate his obdurate nourishment.

This could not go unnoticed for long. One day the boys followed him stealthily, and just as he was in the process of disintegrating his *pinnies* with a stone, their amazed eyes were upon him.

'What the devil are you doing, Maluka?' asked Henry Burton, greatly surprised to see the stone in his hand.

'I'm breaking my lunch,' replied Maluka, confused and embarrassed. The boys burst into loud laughter.

'By God, Maluka, you aren't going to eat that awful stuff!' said Charlie Green. 'You'll explode!'

'I am,' replied Maluka, recovering his natural manner. 'It's good. Try a piece.'

'If you can get away with that, Maluka,' said Joe Campbell, 'you'll soon be eating nails and bits of glass like the *fakirs*.'

Intrigued by the hazardous looking energy balls still intact in the paper, bag, Henry ventured to pick up a piece of the broken *pinnie*.

'Eat and we'll pray for you,' said Charlie.

Henry examined the piece with apprehension.

'Come! Be brave and eat it', urged Joe, 'and let's see what happens to you.'

'It's delicious,' said Charlie, smacking his lips. 'I'm not kidding. Try a piece.'

They relished the small strange fragments with such pleasure that Maluka's lunch problem was solved. His embarrassment was now a thing of the past. He received dainty sandwiches and cuts of delicious cakes in exchange for his *pinnie* pieces, and enjoyed the Western food in the pleasant company of his classmates.

The turban had its handicaps, but it was not without advantages.

Although it is not specifically enjoined upon a Sikh to wear a turban, as it is to keep his hair unshorn, the turban and the beard are as much part of him as the mane is of the lion. The orthodox, in fact, attributed strange powers to it. A newspaper report had described with great appreciation how the Sikh workers, engaged in loading a scow at a wharf in North Vancouver, saved the life of a drowning boy by throwing down their turbans to him. And Bhai Tara Singh was certain that it performed a moral function. When certain movie houses refused entry to the turbaned Sikhs, he was confirmed in his belief that it fulfilled a divine purpose.

'It's a protection against the degeneration of our people,' he would say with satisfaction. 'What's there in the picture shows? Sex and violence. In the darkness, seduction is turned into art and love reduced to immorality.'

Maluka had found the turban cumbersome on the job. The

sawdust got into it, and when it came off in the rush of work, he had to disappear under the mill to tie it on again. In the school it was a handicap in sports; to scrum in rugby practice was impossible. And in the wet season, he had to carry an umbrella to keep it dry. He was delighted to discover, however, that the girls, too, were anxious not to get their hair wet. On a rainy day, therefore, he was seldom alone under the umbrella. He little suspected that his innocent gallantry would lead to endless trouble.

It was not long before his countrymen learned about it. Those who had seen the couple, their heads close to each other, talking and smiling under the umbrella, related the startling discovery in the cook-house with the customary colour and innuendo. Some were amused and some incredulous; some envisioned a calamity and Bhai Tara Singh was furious.

'What's wrong with that?' asked Jugga. 'It keeps two heads from getting wet.'

'And it promotes goodwill between the East and the West,' added Gian Chand.

'Let the young enjoy life,' came a voice from the corner, 'and don't make a virtue out of envy.'

'One folly will lead to another', predicted Bhai Tara Singh gloomily, 'a piece of butter by the fire will melt.'

'You are always troubled by morbid suspicions,' jibed Ganda Singh, 'and you revel in stupid similies. A hundred beautiful fires burn in the school and it isn't flooded with the greasy fluid!'

'On different days,' chuckled a mischievous one, 'there is a different head under the umbrella.'

'All the better!' said Jugga with glee. 'New day, new flower.'

V

The winter brought snow and the gaiety of the Christmas season, both new to Maluka.

The sky was heavy and gray; a thick dull atmosphere muffled everything on the earth. The snow came down thinly at first, in tiny white flakes which whirled about in the wind and vanished as they touched the surface. Soon they floated down

more profusely and grew larger. Drifting about less, they fell faster, and it looked as if some mighty carder with an immense bow was blowing a mountain of cotton in the sky into countless soft fluffy bits without a pause. They began to stay and stick to the surfaces they touched. The dark roofs of the lumber mill and the bunk houses, the gray skeletons of deciduous trees and the debris and filth—all turned immaculate white. The short branches of the evergreens bowed gracefully under the weight and the shrubbery became invisible. Only the Fraser, turning each flake into itself, continued in its nudity—a dark meandering streak in the vast expanse of white.

Even in the stores in Vancouver, small conifers, their needles covered with artificial frost, stood bearing fluffy bits of cotton and glittering decorations. Some displayed a cattle shed with a haloed Child in the manger and three happy, grateful, bearded men in flowing robes.

The stores were full of merchandise and the show windows bright and colourful with attractive displays. People were gay and more friendly—polite even in rush hours. Goodwill was on the earth and business flourished.

Even the workers in the mill got some rest from their toil. The Sikh workers too celebrated the event, like all others, by exchanging gifts, and the more expensive of these went to the bosses and their wives.

'They are not really gifts', observed Jugga cynically, 'they are a payment for favours received and an inducement for the favours expected.'

Maluka, too, received Christmas presents from several of his countrymen, and from the white families to whom he had delivered milk. He was touched most by the gift of a leather-bound Bible from a poor and very religious working man with a large family; everyone had chipped in to make the purchase possible.

Most of Maluka's classfellows were not very religious, and they rarely went to church. One day, however, George Williams, a tall blond boy with a cheerful face and gentle manners, invited Maluka to join him for Sunday school and his family for dinner.

The Sunday school teacher, a pleasant young man with an easy flow of words, told the small group of boys the story of

the prodigal son, and he paused from time to time to ask questions. Towards the end he described the homecoming of the prodigal, and, turning to Maluka, he asked :

'How do you think his father received him ?'

'He took him into the house,' replied Maluka.

'That's right,' said the teacher, a little surprised at the unhesitating reply. 'Have you read the Bible ?'

'No,' answered Maluka, 'It's natural for the father to do that.'

'Yes !' emphasized the teacher. 'And our Father in Heaven will do the same for all repentant sinners who turn to Him.'

'Do you go to church ?' he inquired with concern.

'No, this is the first time.'

'We'd love to have you with us every Sunday', said the teacher with great warmth, 'and we won't ask you to do anything you don't like.'

And Maluka received another copy of the Bible.

It was a severe winter. Water froze in the pipes outside; the puddles became a mass of ice and the bare earth hard as stone. Long tapering icicles hung from the edges of the cook-house roof; they gleamed with the slanting rays of the sun and dripped and lengthened as the sun vanished behind the hills.

Thin sheets of ice began to glisten even on the flowing water of the Fraser; they grew thick with every freezing night. Under the floor of Maluka's shack, half hanging over the river, they cracked and crackled with the rising tide, and the broken bits left behind by the receding water froze in the mud. Soon the ice became thick and river navigation ceased. Maluka was amazed to see some dare-devil skaters gliding over it near the Lulu Island bank.

After the long winter spring came with a pervasive spirit of joy. Such a joy came to the Punjab suddenly when the monsoon brought the life-giving rain to the parched fields. The children of the earth became light-hearted with the heavy odour of the wet earth; the cattle became frisky; the birds preened and pranced and chirped noisily. In the New World the spring stole softly, almost imperceptibly, upon everything. The hillside became a mass of pale haze and the darkgreen

conifers looked darker. Bright white daisies and gleaming buttercups sprang up in the lush green meadows, and the long lilac blossoms, creamy white and deep purple, diffused rich fragrance into the air. Soon the fruit trees joined the carnival of joy. In the parks and gardens elegant beds of bright tulips swayed gracefully in the breeze.

The school atmosphere became more lively. The girls looked more vivacious; they wore brighter colours. The boys became more spirited and jocular. All walked with a spring of joy in their limbs and became more restless in the classroom.

'Come, Maluka', said Jack Murdock, a big, strong rugby player, 'let me show you how to celebrate the spring.'

As the girls entered the long narrow partition at the back of the classroom to hang their school bags, coats and mufflers, Jack tried to get hold of the prettiest to steal a kiss. They resisted half-heartedly to make the yielding more enjoyable, and ran out giggling and blushing.

After school, the more athletic boys and girls turned out in the playground for field sports. Lithe and nimble, they ran and jumped with exuberant vigour and immense joy.

The newspaper delivery boys who collected their allocation of the *Vancouver Sun* and *The Daily Province* at an isolated shack down Fraser Street beyond the small stores, were gay and boisterous. They chatted noisily as they looked through the paper or folded them into firm little square packets and placed them in their large canvas bags. Maluka had always admired them for their dexterity and precision in tossing the folded paper on the customer's porch, right in front of the door, as they rode by on their bicycles through the cobblestone roads.

'Hey! Maluka!' shouted Joe Campbell. 'come and look at the *Sun*. It's full of pictures of India! Fantastic!'

'Yes, come in,' said Charlie Green as Maluka approached the shack, 'they will make you homesick—the snake charmer, the bathing ghats, the dancing girls and the crowded streets with cows in the middle.'

'And you can read the weird stories Bill Bingham writes,' said Harry Brooks. 'He calls himself Footloose in India.'

'My dad says,' added Jim Cummings, 'he spins all those stories by looking into his whisky glass at the hotel bar. It'll

be more appropriate, he says, if Bill Bingham described himself as Headloose in India.'

'You can have the paper, Maluka,' said Charlie. 'I've got an extra.'

'Thanks.'

'Gee! it must be wonderful, 'I'd love to go to India. Look at the cobra. It looks fierce with its hood fanned out. How do they catch them?'

'They tie a piece of muslin cloth to a long bamboo stick and fling the cloth at him. When he bites and gets his fangs stuck in the cloth, they jerk the stick up. One fellow grips the snake at the neck and the other pulls its fangs out. It's harmless after that and ready for show business.'

'You're kidding!'

'No, I am not. The snake must turn over to put the poison into the bite. And if you can keep it from turning over you are safe.'

'Did you ever catch a cobra?'

'Yes, several of them. Fully grown, but still in the egg with a sack-like shell. I found them in the debris behind the old village temple. On piercing the shell they crawled out fast.'

'Didn't you kill them?'

'I certainly did!'

The crowded bathing ghats fascinated Jim Cummings.

'Did you ever bathe in the Ganges?' he asked.

'No, the Sikhs bathe in the sacred tank at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.'

'Oh yes, I saw the pictures in the *Sun* last week. There were pictures of other buildings—old forts and temples, the Mughal palaces and the Taj Mahal. Bingham wrote little stories about each.'

'What did he say?'

'About the Taj he said that the emperor who built it fell in love with a girl who was one of his playmates. He'd given her two pigeons to hold and one flew away. He got mad. "How did it fly," he asked. The girl let go the other one, saying, "Like this!" That trapped him.'

'That's a good story.'

'It's a lot of baloney.'

'Come to the house on Sunday, Maluka,' said Jack Murdock, 'and let's blow the stumps on the lot.'

Jack lived only half-an-hour's walk up the hill from the mill and Maluka often went there. A small one-storey building, it stood on an acre of land. The cleared half not occupied by small shacks—a goat house, a chicken coop, a wood shed and rabbit hutches—was turned into an orchard and a vegetable and flower garden. Mrs Murdock grew a variety of vegetables and had rows of small fruit—strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries and currants, both red and black. And Maluka often helped her in the garden.

"You are strong, Maluka," she would say sweetly, 'and a child of the earth, but you musn't tire yourself.'

And she would disappear into the house and come out with a bowl of sugared strawberries with goat's milk.

'You need nourishment, Maluka,' she would insist. 'Now sit down and eat these. You've done enough.'

Mrs Murdock was a widowed English woman and looked too old to be the mother of an eighteen year old boy. She had taken a small orphan boy as a boarder to supplement her tiny income.

She was a remarkable woman and a great spirit moved her dynamic body. Always in a long dress, light blue or greyish white, that came to her ankles and a cloth cap with a broad fringe, she kept her hands busy and her soul in joy. Her big blue eyes sparkled as she spoke in a soft, kind voice and her lips parted easily into a rich warm smile. Always occupied, she often talked, half under her breath, to the goats, the chicken and the flowers, or in the house and the kitchen to herself.

'This cake is for Maluka. It had better be good. Poor boy, he must miss his mother !'

'The boys will soon be here. I must tidy up the house. Jack can be so messy. They're all alike, these carefree boys !'

In the uncleared half of the lot stood gray charred stumps of fir trees felled long ago, and around them the goats grazed almost hidden in the tall fern. Jack spent more time in his small laboratory in the basement making gunpowder than digg-

ing in the garden. Chemistry was his passionate hobby; gardening only a filial duty.

On Sunday morning, Maluka, Harry Brooks and Jim Cummings came to help Jack.

'How do they pull out the stumps in India?' asked Harry.

'They get elephants to do the hard work,' replied Jim, 'They're intelligent.'

'That's in Burma,' corrected Maluka. 'In the Punjab we don't leave any stumps in the ground. We dig around the tree and cut all the roots before felling it. We've so little fire wood; we can't afford to lose even the roots.'

'That'll take years to get out all the logs we saw in B.C. in a month,' said Jim.

Jack drilled long holes in the bottom part of several stumps. One after the other he filled these with a charge of home-made gun-powder and plugged the hole with an iron piece, leaving out a long fuse.

Everybody ran for shelter as the fuse was lit. A loud bang frightened the goats and a mass of thick dark smoke filled the air with the smell of burning sulphur. Only a few small splinters fell away from the stump which stood firm as ever in the ground.

'You need to learn more chemistry, Jack,' said Jim.

'You better get some elephants from Burma,' counselled Harry.

'Come in, boys,' called Mrs Murdock softly. 'You've done enough. Dinner is ready.'

VII

Doris Mitchell was a shy, bright girl with vivacious brown eyes and a small upturned nose. And when she smiled, her rich lips revealed rows of beautiful, even teeth. Her luxuriant black hair fell down her shoulders almost to the middle of her back, and the thick strands in the front reached her blouse as it rose soft and round.

She was the best student in French, and the teacher's pride. She often helped Maluka with his French exercises, and sometimes looked over his English composition.

She sat in the row next to him in class and only one seat up

to the front. Her left profile—the saucy looking nose, a part of the pink on her white cheek and the small symmetrical ear half hidden by her hair—was always in Maluka's view when he looked at the black-board. Sometimes, as if she felt the warmth of his eyes on her face, she turned around quickly, and the pink of her cheeks rushed up to her ears.

The school year was coming to a close and Maluka wanted to express his appreciation for the help she had given him. At the end of the day he purchased a box of chocolates at the confectionery store on Fraser Street, and putting it into his school-bag, he waited around the corner, where she turned into the side road leading to her house, about half-way to the lumber mill.

'Are you waiting for someone, Maluka?' she asked with a gay smile.

'I'm waiting for you,' he replied shyly. 'I'll walk you home. I want to thank you for all your help.'

'Oh, that's nothing. I didn't do much.'

'You've been very nice. You gave me much of your time.'

'You've done well. You learn quickly.'

They walked slowly along the cobblestone road, turning down the dirt roads for shortcuts. The slanting rays of the sun in June were warm and bright, and the sky without a whiff of a cloud. Doris walked with a rhythmic spring, passion blooming in her limbs. Her face took on more colour and her beautiful hair gleamed against the white blouse. A vague feeling tingled in Maluka's veins and he had a strong urge to pass his fingers softly through its dark luxuriance. Apprehensive that the fire within might burn hot, he clutched the handles of his bicycle firmly.

Along the road the flower beds—gladioli, zinnias and marigold in full bloom and the dahlias loaded with fat opening buds—gave the small houses a warmth and beauty they lacked in the winter. At the front of many, profuse clusters of roses, delicate pink and deep red, almost covered the foliage on the branches, climbing high. Here and there, masses of honeysuckle filled the air with sweet fragrance.

Doris pointed to several houses belonging to the families of the boys and girls who studied in the High School.

'It must be lonesome for you, Maluka, without your family,' she said softly.

'I miss them very much, but the people at the mill are very good to me.'

'Have you a sister ?'

'Yes, younger than I.'

'What's her name ?'

'Gurbachni.'

'And what does it mean ?'

'It means divine expression.'

'How beautiful ! I wish I had a poetic name like that.'

'Doris is a pretty name. Sounds golden.'

'Do all Indian names mean something ?'

'Yes, most of them.'

'What does Maluka mean ?'

'It means the tender one, the soft one.'

'Let me feel if it's true.' And she put the back of her hand gently against his cheek, and the blood ran faster in Maluka's veins.

'Your mother should have called you the warm one,' she said, almost in a whisper.

Maluka was overwhelmed with an onrush of turbulent feeling. He found it hard to say anything. He, in fact, wanted to hide his feeling and suppressed the words he wanted to say.

For some distance they walked without speaking, but the silence between them conveyed much to each other. Soon they reached the crossing near her house.

'I've got something for you,' said Maluka shyly, and reached into his schoolbag for the box of chocolates.

'Oh, Maluka ! You shouldn't have done that !'

'It's a small thing. You've been so good to me.'

She took the box and kissed Maluka softly on the cheek. 'You're so sweet,' she said, pressing his arm and her warm breath added to the glow on his face.

'So long !'

'So long, Maluka.'

All the way down to the mill Maluka walked in a daze of bliss.

VIII

The boys and girls were busy making arrangements for the

annual School Assembly. Each class was planning its contribution with enthusiasm.

One lunch period, several of his classmates gathered around Maluka.

'Our class must make a contribution,' said Jack Murdoch, 'and you've got to help.'

'What can I do?'

'You can sing an Indian love song,' said Jim Cummings, grinning.

'I can't sing!' replied Maluka, very embarrassed.

'Do some Indian tricks,' said Harry Brooks.

'What tricks?'

'Do the rope trick, or swallow swords.'

'No,' said Henry Burton. 'Do something that'll tickle everybody pink. Make some billiard balls vanish up Miss Cousin's nose, and follow it by the French Reader.'

'It'll be more fun making principal Palmer's money disappear,' said Charlie Green. 'He's always rattling it in his pocket.'

The amusing suggestions left Maluka at a loss. He wished he were a magician. What could he do? He was puzzled.

'Tell us how you like the school, Maluka,' said Doris persuasively. 'That's easy.'

'All right,' agreed Maluka. 'I'll do that.'

It was an impulsive assent. When he thought about it, he wondered what to say and how to say it. He pictured himself standing on the platform facing all the teachers and students. The thought frightened him.

James Bradford, a small bespectacled man with a red face, blue eyes and a clipped brown moustache, had been a school-teacher. At the mill he worked as a shipper, an easy job with good pay. He often tallied the lumber on the truck before his two huge Sikh loaders, whom he fondly called his *babar shers*, his lions, stacked it in the box car, and walked about the platform pencil in one hand and tally book in the other, ready for a chat with anybody.

India fascinated him. He had learned to speak a little Hindustani, and enjoyed reading books on Indian art and history. For some mysterious and compelling reason he loved to

pronounce the names of mountains, rivers and cities in India as the Indians did.

When Maluka passed by the loading platform, he greeted him heartily. After asking about the school or making a little polite conversation, he always turned to the subject close to his heart.

'Is it Himalia or Himalaya, Maluka ?'

'Himalia, Mr Bradford.'

'And how do you pronounce Delhi ?'

'Dilli.'

'And Benares ?'

'Banarus, Mr Bradford. The old name was Varanasi.'

'The old name sounds much better. And how do you say Mother Ganges ?'

'Ganga Mai.'

'Maluka, I love the way you say Brahmaputra, lengthening out all the vowels, as Keats did with oriental names. Then you really feel that it sprung from the loins of Lord Brahma, and you can grasp its immensity as it sweeps through majestic mountains and vast plains to join the ocean.'

'They are very poetic names, Mr Bradford.'

'Names embody the spirit of history, Maluka. You can't understand history until you understand the names and pronounce them as the natives do.'

'Yes, Mr Bradford.'

The day Maluka agreed to make the speech at the school assembly, he walked by the loading platform somewhat pensive. 'How's the school, young man ?' asked Mr Bradford, holding the pencil like a teacher. 'Soon you'll have holidays.'

'I am worried, Mr Bradford.'

'About the exams, or is it the summer job ?'

'Neither, Mr Bradford. I am worried about a speech I've agreed to make at the school assembly. I've never made a speech in English. And I've to speak before all the teachers and the students.'

'What are you to speak about ?'

'My impressions of the school.'

'Elementary, my boy, elementary,' said Mr Bradford with a flourish of the hand holding the pencil. 'You're the only one who knows your impressions. All the others are ignorant. Why

should you be nervous ?'

'I don't even know what to say.'

'That's easy. Tell them how the school here differs from your school in the Punjab. Tell how the boys and girls received you and how you felt about them. If they were nice, you can thank them. If not, you can give them a piece of your mind.'

'You make it sound very easy.'

'It is easy. I'll make it easier for you.'

Maluka felt much relieved and encouraged.

'Look my boy. You write the speech and I'll look it over for you. Then read it over again and again. And then you make the speech with me as your audience.'

'Thank you, Mr Bradford, you are so kind and helpful !'

A week later Maluka made his speech in the planer mill shed to the silent machines and to Mr Bradford who blurted out encouragement and instructions like a rugby coach.

'Lift your chin, Maluka ! Look at the far end.'

'Not so fast. Speak as you talk.'

'Relax, Maluka ! Relax.'

'Feel your speech. Let the whole of you speak—face, eyes, body and hands.'

'It was a lovely speech you made last evening, Maluka,' said Doris. 'I would have frozen with fright.'

'Mr Bradford at the mill helped me a lot.'

'Still, it was you who stood on the platform and spoke. You said such nice things about us. Everybody liked it.'

'It was easy to say nice things about nice people.'

'You must be working hard. The exams are coming up soon.'

'You don't have to worry. You're such a good student.'

'Exams frighten me. I get so nervous.'

'What are you doing in the holidays ?'

'I've no plans.'

'Anyway, you'll be at the U.B.C. next September.'

'Not likely, Maluka. Dad's got a better job in the C.P.R. workshop at Calgary.'

'That's far. I'll miss you very much.'

'Good luck in the exams.'

'Same to you.'



IX

Towards the end of each month, Maluka collected money for the milk from Rattan Singh's customers along Marine Drive. He was late in coming home. As he was about to turn down the steep timber road leading to the mill, he was surprised to hear the familiar long end-of-day whistle. It was much too early ! Another followed, and yet another.

Five long shrieking whistles pierced the air, each after a frightening pause.

It was fire !

Maluka rushed down the incline without putting the brakes and peddled hard over the rattling board roads through the lumber yard.

The fire had already gutted the mill !

Feeding on the oil-soaked, dry old wood, the flames leaped and crackled fiercely; the long devastating tongues reached out for the adjacent buildings, and soon the planer mill, the dry kilns and the storage sheds were ablaze. By the time the fire brigade trucks shrieked down from South Vancouver city hall only the lumber yard could be saved.

Workers in their blue dungarees stood helpless and sad like mourners at a cremation. In less than half an hour their livelihood had vanished into smoke. In the darkness of the night the remnants of the mill glowed sharp and fierce, and a death-like silence possessed the humming bank of the Fraser. In the cookhouse, the Sikh workers sat in the dim light of a lantern and spoke of the misfortune in suppressed accents.

Within a week the bunk houses were almost deserted. No fire was lit in the kitchen stove; none under the hot water barrels. The silence of the place became oppressively sad; the boisterous moments that had made the year fly away stood still.

Most workers had rolled up their bedding and packed their few belongings in small battered suitcases and left in search of a new job, not easy to find in a period of declining employment. Fortunately, being without families, they were able to move from place to place without encumbrance. The Indian workers, moreover, had established a commendable social practice. Any man looking for a job could go to any camp and get free board and lodging for the short period required

for negotiation. Most workers left for Vancouver Island, the Okanagan Valley or into the interior of B.C. A few with close connections found jobs around the city. Over a dozen—Sham Singh, Jugga, Prem, Santokh Singh and others—decided to return to India. Natha Singh, respected by the community as much for his genial manner as for his true and simple faith, was appointed as *Granthi*, the priest, at the Vancouver Sikh Temple.



A few old people with little hope of finding another job and unwilling to return home stayed on a little longer. Shortly, they, too, were gone and Maluka lived alone in his shack. Sometimes he sat on the old bench by the Fraser and watched the evening grow dark. In the silence, the gurgling of the rising tide in the bare roots of the shrubbery provided comforting company. Slowly, only a vague outline of things was visible, and the silhouettes of distant conifers looked like tall dark tepees against the sky. Soon the murky river and the darkening brushwood with a fading gleam of the silver birches was swallowed by the night. Maluka thought of all the voices he had heard in the cookhouse, and often the soft admonition : 'Study, Maluka; write our story some day.'

3 The Sikh Temple

MALUKA had imbibed the spirit of the Sikh religion from his mother, but it was in the Vancouver Sikh Temple that he took an active part in the affairs of the Sikh community.

He had learned the meaning of the Sikh gurus' message and the stirring significance of their deeds in his own small village. It was there that he had taken the *pahul*—the initiation through the baptism of the nectar and the sword into the *Khalsa*.

At Amrit Vela, the ambrosial hour of the dawn, when faint light began to diffuse into the darkness of the night, Maluka's mother began to recite the *Japji* while her hands were busy with the household chores. So every morning Maluka opened his eyes to the world with the soft music and the beautiful poetry of the *Japji* in his ears. It seemed as if the whole creation was emerging out of the dark nothingness, and slowly taking form and colour with song and joy.

Maluka hardly understood the meaning of the morning prayer. Its pithy expressions in the sixteenth century Punjabi, with an abundance of Sanskrit, even Persian words, conveyed little more than the music of the moving adoration. But he loved it as a hymn of praise, and its magnificent poetry enriched the hour of waking as the dawn unfolded its wonders every day.

'You must learn to say your morning prayer, my son,' his mother would say as she served early breakfast to Maluka before he started his long walk to school.

'What shall I pray for, mother?' Maluka would ask.

'Pray for all the blessings we enjoy, my son. Pray for all the beauty you see. But most of all pray for light. Without light there is darkness and evil. And you can get light by the grace of the Guru. But you must pray for it with all your heart.'

'Yes, mother', Maluka agreed, little understanding the meaning of grace. He believed that what mother said was true and he should obey her.

'Some day you will go to Amritsar. It was Guru Arjun

Dev, the fifth guru who completed the sacred tank and built the *Hari Mandir*,* It was there that he completed the *Granth Sahib*.† You will hear the *Gurbani* sung in the Hari Mandir and you'll bathe in the Nectar Tank. It would be a great blessing if we can do all this together.'

If Maluka acquired the spirit of his faith from his mother, it was Mata Gujri who introduced him to the life and the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

Mata Gujri was a pious lady of slight build with grey hair and youthful energy. She had a serene beautiful face; her large black eyes sparkled with light and a kindly smile came easily to her lips. Brought up in a cultured Sikh family in Amritsar, she was highly respected by the villagers for her gracious ways and deep learning. Her innate piety, combined with poetic sensitivity, made her an excellent teacher. When she talked about the Sikh gurus, the words came out of her mouth in a soft musical flow; and when she chanted passages out of the *Granth Sahib*, they fell upon the ear with the persuasiveness of a moving song.

Once a week, usually on Sundays, for several years, Maluka, together with his friend Balwant Singh, went to her house, a large impressive red-brick building with a beautiful garden, for religious instruction.

'*Ek Onkar, Satnam*. There is one God, says the Guru, and He is the Supreme Truth.'

'That's the essential thing to grasp,' she would say, raising her small slender hand for emphasis. 'He has no form, no name, no colour, no qualities.'

'He is the fragrance in the flowers, the music in the running brooks. He is in the flows of the river; He is in the stillness of the night.'

And addressing the boys more directly, she added : 'He is

* The Golden Temple; literally the Temple of God.

† The main scripture of the Sikhs. Its actual title is *Adi Granth*, or the first scripture, as distinguished from *Dasam Granth*, or the tenth scripture, the work of Guru Gobind Singh. It was compiled by Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth guru, and includes the compositions of seven gurus (the first five, the ninth and a couplet by Guru Gobind Singh) and of a number of Hindu and Muslim saints of the period.

the joy in your heart, the mischief in your mind and the restlessness in your limbs.'

Mata Gujri often chanted *shabdas** from the *Granth Sahib* in her soft melodious voice. And some of the pithy poetic phrases, heard often, were unforgettable.

Man jito jag jeet—In self-conquest lies the conquest of the world.

Tum tum karte tum hoi—Adoring You, I became one with You.

Sabh se door sabhee ke sanga—Far from all, oh Lord, and yet within each.

Raj men jog kamayo—Be of the world, but not worldly.

'The light came to the Guru with the discovery of the great truth,' emphasized Mata Gujri.

'And how did Guru Nanak find the great truth,' asked Maluka.

'Not through learned disputations with philosophers,' she replied. 'Not through the ritual of the temple priests. Not through the sham renunciation of the ash-smeared yogis. Not in the mechanical prayers of the *mullahs*. All this he found empty, and he ridiculed it with rustic humour.'

'How did he ridicule these, *Matajee*?' asked Balwant Singh, anxious to hear stories.

'At Hardwar,' recounted Mata Gujri, 'the gentle scholar turning into a storyteller, 'Guru Nanak saw the Brahmans throwing water to the East for the manes of their ancestors. And he began to throw it to the West.'

'“What nonsense” exclaimed the Brahmans. “Why this strange ritual?”'

'“I am giving water to my parched fields in the Punjab,” replied the guru.

'“How is your water going so far?” they asked.

'“If yours can go beyond the earth, mine should be able to travel a few hundred miles on the earth,” he replied.'

'Another story,' begged Maluka.

'In Mecca,' said Mata Gujri, 'an indignant *mullah* found the guru sleeping with his feet towards the Ka'aba.

* Hymns ; literally words.

“You can’t lie with your feet towards the House of God!” rebuked the *mullah*.

“My friend,” replied the guru, “you can turn my feet in the direction in which there is no God.”

‘And again at Puri,’ she continued, ‘a Brahman was boasting of his power of clairvoyance. The guru playfully hid his water-pot. And as the Brahman vainly looked for it everywhere, the crowd laughed.’

II

Of all the villagers, the most ardent admirer of the Sikh gurus, in particular Guru Gobind Singh, was Lala Ram Saran.

‘Guru Nanak,’ he would often say, ‘smelted the Hindu ore by burning out the dross of hypocrisy and humbug, caste and priestcraft, idolatry and ritual, and Guru Gobind Singh forged a mighty sword out of that steel.’

‘Guru Gobind Singh’ he would add exultantly, ‘created the *Khalsa* in his own image—a handsome man with a beautiful beard, riding a prancing charger, weapons gleaming, courage undaunted, body disciplined, mind rich with learning and faith undying!’

Lala Ram Saran was an ardent nationalist. To read the *Bande Matram*, a Lahore daily, from cover to cover was his passion. He maintained that the Sikh gurus were the first to infuse the spirit of nationalism in the Hindus of the Punjab. He cherished, even if unconsciously, a sense of pride in the fact that the Sikh gurus, like himself, came from the Khatri (Kshatriya) caste.

A handsome, well-built man with cropped gray hair and a bushy white moustache, Ram Saran ran a *huttee* (small shop), not far from Maluka’s house, for a livelihood. The villagers came there to purchase their domestic requirements; more often they came for gossip, to get the latest news and, in particular, to hear his strong and spicy comments on religion, politics and social customs. His *huttee*, in fact, served as a social and political centre of the village.

In the evenings, except during the busy season, people gathered there casually and sat, smoking and talking, on the gunny sacks spread out on the earthen floor of the verandah.

'*Namaskar*, *Lalajee*, greeted Maluka.

'*Namaskar*, Maluka. How's the school? Are you boys learning anything about our culture and history, or is it only the queer *Angrezi*?'

'Mostly the queer *Angrezi*, *Lalajee*, and a little *hessab* (arithmetic).'

'And nothing about the *behessab* (beyond calculation) sacrifices of the Sikh gurus, made for our survival and our honor? Nothing about the heroic part of our history?'

'Not much, *Lalajee*.'

'Let me light the fire of nationalism in your soul then,' said Ram Saran. 'Read us this poem in the *Bande Matram*,' he added as he handed the paper to him, 'and put some vigour in your voice.'

The poem was in praise of Mahatma Gandhi. It extolled the love of God in his *mûn* (soul), the great renunciation of his *dhûn* (wealth), and the *charkha* (spinning wheel) as his guru.

'And the police *lathi* (stick) on your head is no fun,' Ram Saran punned in comment.

'*Shabash*, *shabash* (well done),' exclaimed the audience.

'Renunciation be damned!' said Ram Saran. 'This humbug philosophy of *kurh maya*, *kurh marhi*, *kurh sâb sansar hai** has been our ruin.'

'And when Kabir says : *Jo tûdh mare jutian, per tinah de chûm*,† he added, 'it isn't humility he is preaching. It is self-abasement and servility.'

'And when Kabir's son Kamal brought home some money,' commented Preetam Singh, the young admirer of the Lala, 'he deplored that it was not God but gold.'

'*Nam Dev*,** said Bhola Singh *Chaukidar* (the village watchman), 'saw God everywhere with such deep love that he ran after the dog who had stolen his *chappatis* to give it butter.'

* Worthless the wealth, worthless ambition, worthless and illusory the entire world.

† Kiss their feet, who beat you with shoes, Oh Kabir. Kabir (1440-1518) was a Muslim weaver, who became a disciple of the Brahman saint Ramananda and sang moving devotional songs in Hindi with a pithy idiom and a penetrating style.

** *Nam Dev* (1269-95), a Maharashtra saint, sang of God's love with ecstatic joy from the age of seven.

Everybody laughed; for they all had to chase the stubborn stray village dogs out of the house at every mealtime.

'In this land of yogis claiming extraordinary powers; in this unfortunate land of saints obsessed with the nothingness of life,' said Lala Ram Saran, raising both his voice and his right hand in protest, 'we have lived as helpless victims of the Muslim invaders and then of the British for nine centuries. Isn't that a horrible disgrace?'

'They still roam the country in ochre garb and feeding well,' said Chaudhary Bhana who hated idlers, no matter how holy.

'Their strange paraphernalia and their esoteric science,' commented Ram Saran, 'tempted all kinds of impostors to practise their fraud on the gullible public.'

'Get the well-fed loafers into the field for the harvest,' advised Gangu, the rugged village blacksmith, 'and sweat the humbug out of the bastards.'

'They are too holy to work,' replied Chaudhary Bhana, 'all you need to do in this country to get what you want is to renounce the world!'

'But all those saints,' said Pandit Shankar Das timidly, 'have provided great comfort to our people in their despair. They preached that God's mercy and love was there for each of us. All were equal in His eyes.'

'That may be so,' replied Lala Ram Saran learnedly, 'but they didn't stand for equality here and now. They didn't assert social and political equality with the force and vigour of the Sikh gurus.'

'It was the Sikh gurus,' continued Ram Saran with fervour, 'who liberated the Hindus from the curse of renunciation and the blight of the caste system. It was they who freed them first from the tyranny of the social system imposed upon them by the Brahmans, their religious leaders, and then from the tyranny of the Muslims, their conquerors. Their institution of *langar*, the free kitchen, where all ate as a fraternity of equals, was the most effective blow against the caste system. And the transformation that Guru Gobind Singh brought about through his teachings and personal example and through the magic of the *pahul* (baptism of the sword) enabled them to stand up to their conquerors with amazing courage. I say follow the example of the Gurus!'

'Maluka will soon be taking the *pahul*,' said Preetam Singh.

'When is the great event to take place, Maluka?' asked Ram Saran.

'In a month or so, Lalajee,' replied Maluka. 'Mata Gujri is teaching us, Balwant and myself, the meaning of the *pahul*. She is teaching us the discipline required and the privileges gained on becoming part of the Khalsa.'

'So you will soon be inheriting the heroic tradition and the insignia of the Khalsa,' said Preetam Singh. 'Guru Gobind Singh wanted to test the courage and firmness of his disciples before joining the battle for liberation.'

'And in those days of persecution,' added Santa Singh, the village carpenter, 'it took great courage to declare oneself a Sikh. So only the most devoted and fearless volunteered. And the insignia, the unshorn hair and the sword, gave the sense of unity and promoted a brotherhood of the select.'

'It served as a common uniform of the soldiers of freedom,' emphasized Ram Saran. 'It strengthened the will to sacrifice.'

'It was a great transformation, Maluka,' said Preetam Singh. 'Even women were infused with amazing courage and determination. You must know that when forty of the Guru's soldiers deserted him at a critical moment in Anandpur and went home, their women folk offered them their skirts and bangles. The deserters were so ashamed of their disgraceful action that they all went back under the leadership of a militant woman, Mai Bhago, and died fighting to the last man.'

A week before the *pahul* ceremony, Maluka's father brought the *Granth Sahib*, carrying it with great respect upon his head, as it lay wrapped in an embroidered silk shawl on a small bedstead.

It was installed in a large room in the house. And for seven days during which it was read by a *granthi* from page to page, the villagers came, at any time convenient to them, to listen to the *gurbani*, and, as a sign of respect, entered the room with feet bare and heads covered.

Maluka and Balwant, after having their bath, dressed in new clothing and wore the *Punj kakas* (the five K's):

Kesa (long hair)—traditionally worn by saintly devotees in India;

Kanga (comb)—a symbol of discipline and order;

Kaccha (short breeches)—a symbol of activity in services, also worn by epic heroes;

Kara (iron bangle)—to be worn on the right arm as a symbol of self-control in action;

Kirpan (sword)—a symbol of courage and self-respect, and a weapon to be used for the defense of the faith, the protection of the weak and the vindication of one's right.

They took their seats in the assembly in front of the *Granth Sahib*. Five Sikhs of good standing made the *Amrit* (nectar) by stirring some sugar into the water in an iron container with a double-edged sword, while the *Granthi* chanted verses from the *Granth Sahib*.

The solution was then sprinkled over their hair and body while they repeated the prescribed vows and pronounced the Sikh salutation *Wahiguru ji ka khalsa, Wahiguru ji ki fateh*.^{*} Both drank some of the solution out of the iron vessel as an acceptance of the casteless Khalsa brotherhood and were confirmed as *Singhs* (lions).

III

'Gurdwara has always meant a great deal to the Sikhs, as you know, Maluka,' said Bhai Tara Singh, 'but it has meant much more to us in Canada.'

'It has covered a wider range of activity than it did in India,' explained Natha Singh. 'It became the political storm centre of the community in addition to being a place of worship. It also served as an employment exchange, for here people learned of job opportunities in different places.'

'A devoted Sikh among early immigrants,' added Bhai Tara Singh, 'had brought the *Granth Sahib*, with him. We placed it on a *takht* (raised platform) in a large room in a house and that became our provisional *Gurdwara*.'

'And the *Sangat*, the Sikh fraternity, had emerged,' added Natha Singh. 'It has, as you know, the status of a lawgiver

^{*} The Khalsa is of the Guru, the victory is also of the Guru.

and the judge among us. A *Sangat*, as representative of the *Khalsa*, has not only the right to punish the offender against the established forms and conventions, it also has the power to change them.'

'As early as 1907,' said Bhai Tara Singh, 'we established the "Khalsa Diwan Society" in Vancouver, with branches in Victoria, New Westminster and Abbotsford.'

'Two years later,' added Natha Singh proudly, 'we built the Gurdwara in Vancouver and in 1912 in Victoria.'

'And we began to publish our own papers—*Desh Sewak* (the Servant of the Land) and later *Sansar* (The World),' said Banta Singh, who had served as assistant editor on one of these.

Every Sunday the Punjabi immigrants, both Sikhs and non-Sikhs, gathered at the Vancouver Sikh Temple in large numbers. Before and after the service they stood in small groups in the temple yard or out front on the sidewalks discussing matters of personal concern or enjoying idle talk and spicy gossip. Maluka, anxious to know the community, seldom missed the service which was always held in the afternoon to enable people from distant farms and lumbermills to participate.

'In the early days,' said Natha Singh, 'the Gurdwara was always crowded. Our people found themselves in a strange environment, not always friendly. And few spoke English. There was hardly any social contact with the whites. Our people, therefore, were drawn very close to each other, and the community spirit was very strong.'

'Many,' added Bhai Tara Singh, 'who had seldom gone to a Gurdwara in the Punjab, turned in B.C. to the faith of the Gurus for light and leading. In it they found both spiritual comfort and the will to face all difficulties with courage. A large number took their *pahul* here and became ardent members of the *Khalsa*.'

'It was the same way in the British Army,' said Natha Singh. 'Young recruits from small, isolated villages knew little of the Gurus' teachings when they joined the army. And in a few years they became devoted Sikhs. This was encouraged by the British, for they believed that the initiation into the *Khalsa* made them better soldiers. They believed it made them fearless

and unyielding on the battlefield; it made them kind and considerate in daily life.'

Maluka was happy to see that a gradual change had come over the congregation. A large number of ladies sat on one side of the spacious hall with white sheets over their legs. Their heads were covered with colourful silk *dupattas*; white or light blue and pastel shades over the greying hair and bright colours—crimson red, mustard yellow, gleaming gold—on the jet black hair of the young. The number of young boys, children of early immigrants, was much larger. They walked energetically up to the *Granth Sahib* in their stocking feet, made a quick athletic obeisance and sat close to their friends. A group of them, musically gifted and well trained, gave a delightfully rendering of *shabdas* (hymns), their rich modulated voices rising in devotional joy to the rhythmic accompaniment of a harmonium, *tabla* and cymbals. In addition, a few young men had come on students' visas; among them, much to Maluka's delight, his *dharam bhai* (brother of the faith), Balwant. Tall and slender, he looked strikingly handsome in a striped blue suit and a light blue turban. The downy black beard wreathing his face seemed to accentuate his sharp clear-cut features—the large brown eyes looked larger, the mouth fuller and the even rows of teeth gleaming white.

'It's a pity', said Natha Singh, 'that some of the older men should come back from India with wives young enough to be their daughters!'

'It's more than a pity', asserted Ganda Singh, 'it's a disaster!'

'But what could they do', reflected Arjan Singh, 'they were too poor when young and no one would give them his daughter in marriage. Now they are old, but they have rupees.'

'It's a shame', said Natha Singh. 'Such a marriage might work out in the village where the young wife lives as part of the joint family and the husband tills his own land. But here the wife is alone all day in the house while the husband is sweating in a mill.'

'No wonder', observed Arjan Singh, 'the young wives look at the handsome boys with hungry eyes.'

'Look at Bishni', said Ganda Singh. 'She is so young and

pretty. You can feel the dance of passion in her limbs as she walks. It glows on her lips. It leaps out of her eyes. And the poor husband is too old to cool it into peaceful silence.'

'He is too tired even to come with her to the Gurdwara on Sunday', added Natha Singh.

'It's just as well,' commented Arjan Singh. 'She enjoys herself better alone. The fires burn bright in her when she talks to young fellows and she can giggle as cooly as she wishes.'

'She can hardly lift her eyes off Balwant when he is in the congregation,' said Ganda Singh impishly. 'And who can blame her? Maluka, you better warn your friend!'

'It's impossible to keep you fellows from gossiping', said Satnam Singh with a gentle reprimand. 'On Sunday you are supposed to listen to *Gurbani* and be uplifted by it.'

IV

Satnam was a quiet studious man with a retiring disposition and shy manners. And yet the welfare of the community was his chief concern. During discussions in the *Sangat*, however, he preferred to convey his views through others more aggressive in temperament and persuasive in speech.

A man of medium height and well-proportioned, Satnam was always neatly dressed, though folded newspapers often stuck out of his pockets. His receding hairline and clipped grey moustache, his pensive look and deliberate manner of speaking made him look more like a college professor than a C.P.R. gardener. Soon after the Canadian Pacific Railways had extended the long steel band to Vancouver, it built several immense colonial houses with large gardens in the beautiful residential area of Shaughnessy Heights. Satnam was engaged to maintain three of them, and he lived by himself in a comfortable apartment above the coach house. It was perhaps his independent and secure job and his aloofness from the community that enabled him to cut his hair and discard the turban for a fedora without fearing too much the effect of its disapproval. A keen student of current events, he subscribed to several periodicals, Punjabi, Urdu and English, and had collected a small library of books, mostly on history and politics. Young people, in particular the students, were greatly drawn to him, and they often

visited him in his small secluded residence. A generous host, he exercised a gentle and enlightening influence.

On a Saturday afternoon, Satnam served his four young visitors rich pastry and Darjeeling tea which he loved for its Himalayan fragrance. He showed them several articles on 'Indians Abroad' by Srinivasa Shastri and Lala Lajpat Rai, both of whom had taken a keen and continued interest in the Indian emigrants, and had advised them to adapt to the ways of the land of their adoption.

'You young fellows must break away from the ghetto,' said Satnam in his slow deliberate manner. 'What's the point in leaving India, travel across the ocean and then live in a miniature motherland abroad?'

'Yes', replied Balwant, 'you are right. We see so little of the Canadian people. The older folk in our community are completely taken up by their own personal and community problems.'

'They talk bitterly of discrimination and prejudice against them', said Tarlok Singh, a sports enthusiast.

'They always think of going back to India', added Mehr Singh who was glad to have left his motherland. 'Nobody will respect them outside, they say, until India is free.'

'Much of what they say is true', confirmed Satnam. 'But things are better now than what they were ten or fifteen years back. And the change will be quicker now that the war has shaken up the world. But we must also change and adapt to the ways of the people among whom we live.'

'They always say that they are going to return to India for good,' said Maluka, 'and many went back after the fire at the Dominion mills.'

'That's their idle dream', replied Satnam. 'Those who go back return within a year. Most of those who left after the fire, Maluka, will be back soon, their pockets empty and their illusions lost.'

V

On a Sunday afternoon before the close of the service Maluka stood up to announce that a meeting would soon be

held in the dining-hall below to discuss the organisation of a youth club or association, and invited all to attend.

It was a crowded meeting and Balwant Singh took the chair. He explained the need for the establishment of the Hindustani Young Men's Association and specified some of its proposed functions.

'Why this separate organisation from us old fellows?' asked Bhai Hira Singh, stroking his white beard nervously. 'Why are we excluded?'

'For one thing,' explained Tarlok Singh, 'we shall be doing sports.'

'We can watch you do these,' replied Hira Singh. 'Or do you plan to do things you don't want us to see?'

'We are told', said Bhai Santokh Singh, 'that one of the functions of the Association would be to establish social contact with the white people here through musical performances. Does that mean dances and things?'

'We were not thinking of these,' assured Balwant somewhat embarrassed. 'We were thinking of song and musical activities such as we perform in the Gurdwara.'

'Would the Association explain to the people here the beauty and the wisdom of the Sikh faith?' asked Bhai Tara Singh.

'Is Bhai Tara Singh hoping to spread Sikhism in Canada?' asked Ganda Singh. 'Does he really believe that we can persuade people here to become Sikhs, take the *pahul* and grow long hair and beards?'

'I see nothing strange or impossible in that', replied Bhai Tara Singh in a firm voice. 'The Christian missionaries are propagating their faith very successfully in India. Why can't we do the same here?'

'Would the educated members of the Association be prepared to give lectures on the teachings of the Sikh gurus to the people here?' he asked pointedly.

'Yes', assured Balwant, 'we shall be most happy to do that.'

'Then I support the proposed association,' said Tara Singh enthusiastically.

Not all the orthodox in the gathering were happy with the establishment of the Hindustani Young Men's Association. Many of them were afraid that once the young Sikhs began to



minge freely with the youth of the country, they would lose much of their faith, the cultural moorings and even the outward symbols of their religion.

VI

With the spring nature renewed itself in refreshing colours and flowers bloomed in gorgeous arrays in the parks and the gardens in Vancouver. It provided an appropriate setting for celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday.

The Khalsa Diwan Society of Vancouver sent a jubilant circular letter to the members of the Indian community in different parts of B.C. and California, inviting them all to share the joy of paying homage to Guru Nanak and seek his blessing for a renewal of the old faith. The *langar* (free kitchen) during the celebration, it was announced, would be provided by two devoted Sikhs who chose to remain anonymous. Announcements inviting the public were placed in *The Daily Province* and the *Vancouver Sun*, indicating in particular that speeches would be made in English.

Several days before the Sunday celebration groups of Sikhs who made a long holiday out of the occasion, began to arrive from different parts of B.C.—lumberjacks from Prince George and Prince Rupert, farmers from Kelowna and Kamloops, loggers from isolated camps in the interior, and groups from a number of small mills on Vancouver Island. On Sunday morning large batches of Sikhs arrived from neighbouring places—New Westminster, Port Moody, Fraser Mills, Abbotsford, Mission. They approached the Sikh Temple in a procession—young boys with yellow *kamarbands*, carrying the Sikh *Nishans*, followed by a group of musicians playing simple instruments and singing *shabdas*, all walking in a leisurely army formation.

The celebration was attended by a large number of English-speaking people from the city. Some retired army officers were there with their wives, no doubt drawn by a sentimental attachment to the Sikh regiments with which they had served. Some students of oriental religions, in particular, the theosophists, had come as spiritual seekers. A surprisingly large number of young people had turned up, anxious perhaps to know some-

thing about their exotic neighbours. Many had come for the novelty.

Young Sikh boys helped them take their shoes off, meritorious service in the Gurdwara, and led them into the hall. Some sat on the carpet a little uncomfortably and many preferred to stand at the different doorways.

Giani Diwan Singh with his flowing white beard and symmetrical blue turban sat on the *takht* behind the open *Granth Sahib*, waving a huge flywhisk under a colourful canopy. He recited the verses in a rich melodious voice and gave them a modernistic interpretation.

After a party of musicians and singers gave a soul-stirring rendering of *shabdas*, Balwant Singh spoke in English on the *Birth of the Khalsa*. He explained how cruel and tragic historical events had led to the transformation of the peaceful disciples of Guru Nanak into a fierce fighting force of the Khalsa under Guru Gobind Singh. The tolerance of Akbar had given place to the bigotry of Aurangzeb and the feeling that the Mughal empire was disintegrating had made him more cruel and oppressive. These intolerable conditions were further aggravated by fresh invasions from the North-West.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) had witnessed with anguish the suffering of the people. His own father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, had been beheaded at Delhi by the emperor's order when he was only nine years of age. He brooded in the seclusion of the Himalayan Hills (Anandpur) and became convinced that when faith itself is threatened with extinction, it is legitimate, even an essential duty, to preserve it with force. And this had led him to introduce the baptism of the sword, and the establishment of the Khalsa.

Balwant was followed by Maluka who began by giving a sketch of Guru Nanak's life (1468-1539) in a historical setting and said that, eliminating form and ritual, Guru Nanak arrived at the essence of religion which meant righteous living, arising out of a feeling of oneness with man and nature.

More specifically, he explained, Nanak preached *Sadhana* (self-realization) through *Vismadh Marga* or the Path of Wonder. It was the path of delight in the beauty of creation; it gave the poet his song and the artist his creativity. It crowned the effort of the household, through service and self-sacrifice

out of love, with happy achievement.

That was why, when Guru Nanak saw the Brahman priest at the evening service waving a salver of small oil lamps and incense before the temple god, he advised, like a true poet : 'Let the heavens be thy salver and the scattered stars thy lamps. Let the woods of sandal be thy incense and the forest flowers thy offering. So worship thou the Supreme Artist in gratitude for the joy of living and gain bliss.'

Guru Nanak advised that if you wish to live truly and fruitfully, or, as he put it metaphorically, if you would wish to mint out of your life a coin of gold, let self-discipline be your glowing forge and patience the superb goldsmith, let knowledge be your tool and reason the anvil. Then blow the bellows with the fear of God in your mind and a prayer of love in your heart. For salvation is to be gained not by Works alone, nor by Grace alone; it is to be gained by Grace enabling Works.

4 The Broadening Horizon

THE two formative years in the high school made Maluka identify himself increasingly with his adopted country.

He took a boyish pride even in its geography. It was the second largest country in the world; it had more lakes than the rest of the world combined. He often longed to cross the Rockies and see the vast Prairies, and, beyond these, the old Canada on the lake shores and along the St. Lawrence, where its short history had been made. How exciting to follow back the routes of the early explorers and see the wilderness half-tamed, in places wholly conquered. He even dreamed of crossing the Atlantic someday to see England and France which had transported, together with their men and merchandise, their quarrels and rivalries, their pride and prejudice, their art and literature to the New World. More fascinating, indeed, than the courageous adventures of the explorers was the creative adventure of the human mind.

Canada, Maluka discovered, was very different from India, and the differences were not merely cultural and social. Even the Indian jungle, humming with life, its creeping fingers restless to repossess the cleared land, was very different from the cool clean woods of stately pine and fir in Canada.

An ancient land, studded with the crumbling ruins of old empires and the rich treasures of man's creativity, India was oppressed by history. It bowed too often and too low before its past. In Canada, on the other hand, people had come not merely in search of a better life, but also, in most cases, to escape from their past. Robust frontier individualism gave freshness to experience and decisiveness to action. Man was engaged in folding the wilderness back like earth against the plough and building a new civilization. And the result was so fruitful that he rejoiced over his achievements in a spirit of triumph, and looked to the future with great self-assurance.

There were no Brahmans in the New World. The business

of living was dominated and directed by the men of business, and they looked askance at those whose business was ideas. Knowledge was not virtue here, as Buddha had believed, nor a graceful acquisition of the aristocrat. Knowledge meant power; it must give an account of itself in action. And commonsense was prized more than knowledge. Politicians appealed to it at the hustings; businessmen profited by its un-failing guidance; its possession in abundance was a flattering compliment.

More surprising, success in one field conferred versatility in many others. Prominent movie stars pronounced on complicated matters of state; ace bridge players wrote on war and peace; and bustling millionaires enlightened the less fortunate with their philosophy and determined the fate of art and literature with snappy comments.

And an idle man, holy or unholy, was not wanted in the New World. Activity, intense and vigorous, was imperative. And success, ever new and greater, was the crowning prize of all activity. The criteria of success, moreover, was quantitative. Spacious surroundings and unlimited horizons, combined with a buoyant ego nourished by easy success, led to the cult of big-ness. Business, fortunes and building had to grow ever bigger to fulfil the man of action.

What impressed Maluka most in the New World was that here, at last, the plain man had come into his own. Salesmen analyzed his needs and sentiments, exploited his hopes and fears and pandered to his pride and vanity to push the curve of profits a little higher. The press played upon his predilections; the world of entertainment trimmed its production to his tastes and requirements. And, more important, he believed that he became what he made of himself. He looked continuously ahead, for every new day held a new promise and yesterday was dead. Never before did toil claim a greater dignity; nowhere else did struggle give the plain man more self-assurance.

In spite of the striking differences between India and Canada, however, Maluka was surprised to notice certain similarities. Canada, like India, had no national flag; both saluted the Union Jack. Nationalism was as absent here as it had been in India before the war. He, in fact, found Canadians more chauvinistic about England, 'the mother country', than about

Canada. And, much to his astonishment, when he spoke of having received a letter or a parcel from the mother country, he was asked whether his people lived in England. Canada, like India, sang 'God Save the King'; 'Oh Canada' was there, but people knew it only a little better than the 'Bande Matram' was known in India.

Maluka, like other students who had been sucked into the national movement in India, had resented very much Lord Macaulay's famous sentence in which he had graded different nations in a descending scale of virtue, with the British at the top and the Indians at the bottom. He was surprised to find that it was in Canada, apparently free of the caste system, where Macaulay's self-glorifying gradation was quietly operative. Leaving aside the negroes and the coloured immigrants from the Orient, even the whites, it seemed were not all equally white. The British-born and their descendants stood at the top; other Canadians, whose status depended somewhat on their national origin, followed a blurred succession—the Germans, the Scandinavians, the French, the Russians, the Eastern Europeans, the Greeks, the Italians and the Jews. The last, even though they had come from different European countries and revealed obvious differences in the colour of their hair and eyes, were given a separate national origin.

II

The University of British Columbia consisted of one two-storey stone building surrounded by a number of sprawling wooden structures near the Vancouver General Hospital. The 'shacks', where Maluka had most of his lectures, looked more like workers' sheds than sedate halls of learning, but the lively atmosphere made up for the rudimentary facilities. Most of his professors were learned scholars and exhilarating teachers. Among the students he had many friends, for a number of his school alumni had joined the University. He enjoyed taking part in field sports, and tried, with success and satisfaction, to live up to his nickname 'Danger' by playing grass hockey for the University with notorious roughness on the smooth green playgrounds in Stanley Park. Student groups often met for discussions in the homes of prominent citizens, and his widening con-

tact with Canadian life was not less stimulating than his academic introduction to Western thought and literature.

Tall and angular, Professor Wood looked austere with his pincenez, his penetrating eyes and his short hair parted in the middle with neat severity. He lectured with a precision of speech and gesture hard to excel, and introduced his students to the art of drama through Euripides and Sophocles.

'Be like the Greeks,' he would say, each word ringing clear and each carrying its meaning with the ease of a flying bird. 'Be simple and direct.'

'Before you write anything,' he would elaborate, 'be sharp in your observations and thorough in your understanding. And when you write, be honest. Don't shrink from facts. Don't mince your words.'

'The Greeks were able to do this,' he would conclude, 'because they were like children with mature intellect. Their mind was as clear as the sky over the Acropolis, and their spirit as fresh as the breath of dawn.'

This was in sharp contrast to much of the Eastern literature Maluka had studied. The Persian and Urdu poets often let their imagination soar into a colourful splendour, and they described what they had seen or felt with emotional magnanimity, embellishing their lines with a striking idiom, a picturesque epithet or words that rolled with a flattering effect on the ear. A couplet of the poet Zoq from his eulogy of the prince often came to his mind :

The pebble on the path kissed by your foot-print, oh Prince sublime,
Rises to shine brighter than the stars till the end of time.

At *mushairas** in India, such couplets were often received with acclaim. After learning to analyze and appreciate good writing, Maluka read oriental poetry of this kind with a tolerant smile.

III

Entering the University of British Columbia, Maluka entered

* A public gathering where poets read aloud their compositions.

the vigorous stream of Western culture. The buoyant refreshing stream, flowing from its sources in Greek enlightenment and Hebraic morality, had added much to its force and volume during its passage over the turbulent centuries. And the addition appreciated most in the New World was the scientific method and technology—both skillfully applied here to conquer nature and to increase production. Maluka found the key to this heritage in the English language, and he soon learned to love it not only for its own force and beauty and for the nobility of thought enshrined in it, but also because it made accessible to him the entire range of European thought and literature.

There were other reasons for his admiration of Western thought. What force was there in it, he wondered, that enabled a handful of British to rule over an immense India which boasted of a unique spiritual heritage. Other countries of the West, including Holland and Belgium, hardly discernible on the desk globe, repeated the episode, with minor variation, in other parts of the world. The West, in youthful exuberance, was everywhere. It had inherited the earth; it dominated the seas; it was invading the heavens. What was the secret of its achievement?

The ordinary working man in Western countries, moreover, had acquired an economic status which, in spite of his comparative poverty and the threat of unemployment, enabled him to assert himself effectively through adequate organisations, and thus acquire a measure of control over his destiny. No other civilization, oriental or occidental, however great its material glory, however promising its spiritual splendour, had ever been able to achieve this in the past.

Maluka didn't have to be reminded by Matthew Arnold that 'The East bowed low before the blast/ In patient deep disdain.' Nor was he exhilarated by the poetic assurance that having 'let the legions thunder past,' it 'plunged in thought again', for in the East thought was even at a lower ebb than political power. Was not the decline of political power, he asked himself, the consequence of social stagnation, intellectual aridity and spiritual decay?

'We make too much of this spiritual stuff in our civilization,' said Satnam Singh in his quiet way. 'We use it like a cloak to

hide our weaknesses. But it hides them only from ourselves.' 'Like old people,' added Ganda Singh, 'we're always talking about the past. There's little in our present to be proud of. So we imagine our past to be all the more glorious.'

'It gives some satisfaction,' said Maluka.

'Yes,' agreed Ganda Singh, 'it's a poor people's pastime. It costs nothing. And it does nothing to change the present.'

'And the present,' observed Balwant Singh bitterly, 'is not at all pleasant. What glory. what spirituality is there in a beggar woman asking for a *paisa* in the name of God all day long? And in hungry people accepting filth and disease as their fate?'

'And in spite of all this,' added Ganda Singh, 'many in India proudly claim that they are more concerned about *moksha** than material progress.'

'Only a few at the top,' observed Satnam Singh, 'have enjoyed the good things of life in the past, and it is they who glorify the past most.'

'I wish I could hold our people by the neck,' said Ganda Singh vehemently, 'and turn their faces away from the past.'

'Our young people can learn much from the West,' said Satnam Singh. 'And you can't do that by reading books alone. You must live among them and work with them. You must get to know their attitude to life, their approach to problems.'

IV

Balwant Singh, together with two other Indian students, had also joined Class '24 at the University of British Columbia. Encouraged by Satnam Singh they had broken away from the Hindu ghetto on False Creek and rented an apartment near the University. Hardly a fortnight had passed when their landlady informed them that they would have to leave.

'I've no prejudice, you understand,' she said apologetically. 'But the other tenants will leave if I don't ask you to do so. I must consider my interest. I shall, of course, return your advance on the rent.'

Balwant, so proud and handsome, so neat and clean in his

* Spiritual salvation.

ways, was furious.

'First these white bastards tell us,' he burst out to Satnam Singh, 'that we refuse to mix with them. When we try to live among them, they put us out of the lodgings in their quarter. What are we to do? You should see how filthy some of these white pigs are.'

'Don't get too excited,' said Satnam Singh who had lived in Vancouver for twenty years, 'things are much better now. Greater men than you and I have been insulted here. Even Tagore was not spared.'

'What happened to the poet?' asked Maluka anxiously.

'India,' replied Satnam, 'had been very much in the papers with Gandhi's campaign. And the marriage of a Seattle girl, Nancy Miller, with the notorious Maharaja of Indore provided material for romantic stories. Tagore who had come on a lecture tour just afterwards could easily be taken for a Sikh. And before he was allowed to cross the U.S. border, the immigration officials gave him the works; after a long wait he was asked whether he could read and write, sign his name, and prove that he would not be a public charge in the U.S.A.—and other such questions. The poet could hardly contain his fury. And when, in Seattle, the journalists flocked around him for an interview, he refused to speak. But a very aggressive female jumped on the running board of his car.'

'What do you think of Nancy Miller marrying the Maharaja of Indore?' she piped out.

'Madam,' replied the poet sternly, 'she was honoured!'

'This was the only speech Tagore made in the U.S.A. during that tour.'

Fortunately, Maluka had no such disagreeable experience—not yet—in finding lodgings, for he continued to live in his shack on the Fraser. But he was learning fast what people thought of India.

On a Sunday evening when he was wandering around in the city looking for free entertainment, he entered a lecture hall where a retired English Colonel was to speak on 'My experiences in India.'

The Colonel began with a hearty tribute to the ancient culture of India. Its saints and sages, he said, had visioned

great truths. It had turned rock caves into palaces of art; it had carved soft-stone mounting into gorgeous temples. But after the collapse of the Mughal empire the country had disintegrated. Gods still had their magnificent temples and the princes their luxurious palaces, but the life of the poor in the city slums and small villages was miserable. Internal strife had made life itself unsafe. And the British brought both peace and prosperity to the country.

If the British were to leave, he emphasized, the Hindus and the Muslims would cut each others' gizzards, but he praised the Sikhs highly for their martial valour.

In the last war, he said, they made a hobby of collecting Victoria Crosses. There was no word for retreat in their language; when such action became unavoidable, the command must be: 'Turn about—March.' He even took upon himself to explain the reason for their amazing vigour and tenacity. When a Sikh baby is born, he revealed, they throw him on the roof of the house; if he hangs on, they save him.

The laughter of the crowd added to Maluka's embarrassment; he was very disconcerted that in a scientific age his people had retained such a primitive method of selection. And yet he was moved by a desire to meet the speaker.

'It was a very illuminating speech, sir,' he said to the Colonel as he shook his hand. 'I was thrilled to discover what a tough baby I must have been!'

Maluka was to hear many fantastic speeches on the land of his birth. In fact, he was learning as much about India in Vancouver as he did about Canada.

One speaker, anxious to show that the Indian workers were born trade unionists, said that when he supplied a wheelbarrow to his two gardeners, they continued to ply it together, one holding up the handles and the other pulling at the axle.

Another, fascinated with India's philosophy and the forces of the occult, informed his audience that in the region where Lord Krishna had delivered his message of love, wolves still roamed peacefully with the deer. Yogis in India, he said, could hypnotize you with a look and read your mind like a book. And up in the Himalayas, they lifted themselves from one hill-top to another with effortless ease.

The missionaries on home leave, on the other hand, specialized in describing the ugly heathen customs of the beautiful country, and the vast variety of fascinating gods and goddesses adored by its people. Often they exhibited crudely carved pieces of timber and hideous idols of soft stone worshipped by tribesmen in remote parts of India. The lectures by the pious missionaries, however, never came up to the liveliness of the colourful Colonel. In fact, the lifeless pagan deities turned out to be the most animated part of the Church speeches. And, much to Maluka's surprise, these symbols of primitive poetry, expressing the hopes and fears of simple folk, received more generous offerings in Canada than they ever did in the land of their birth.

Back in the loneliness of his shack, Maluka tried desperately to acquire a cracking command of the English language in order to whiplash these errant knights of oratory with phrases that would burn and sing.

V

There was no sign that the lumber mill would be rebuilt. The stubs of the charred foundation piles stood in the grey ashes like burnt out hopes and the twisted pieces of old machinery had grown rusty. In many places tufts of green grass, even the yellow blooms of dandelions, had risen as if to reassert their old claim on the land. The high piles of dry lumber in the yard, salvaged from the fire, had been dismantled by a buyer. Maluka was sad to see them go; they had always made him think of the workers whose hard patient labour had built them. Even the cats which had prowled greedily around the cook-house had vanished, and the flocks of seagulls had thinned out.

At night, Maluka sat by a kerosene oil lamp, not very different from the lamp he had used in the village, and for company he had books. He read voraciously, often aloud to himself, as if to put life into the silence around him and keep solitude occupied. At times the solitude was as vast as the night, and the silence undisturbed even by a hooting owl. He had many questions to ask. But when he ventured to ask one, it brought back only its own echo. And often the echo

reverberated frighteningly, as if it had come of a deep desert well.

Visitors, the former employees of the mill, came on Sunday mornings. A fond remembrance or a simple need had brought them back. For a moment the deserted cookhouse breathed with life again, and the old memories of its crowded, noisy days were recalled with a wistful longing or with philosophic resignation. A few half-legible letters in a cramped hand were read; a few simple ones written in reply. On parting, some left a message for a friend, some money to be sent home or deposited in their bank accounts, and some a touching token for Maluka.

Some of those who had returned to India after the fire, started to come back and brought news of others. Sham Singh was happy plying his ox-cart again on the Hoshiarpur-Jullundur road; Santokh Singh had purchased more land and dug a well; Khem Singh had built a two-storey red brick house; and Jaimal Singh had breathed his last.

To see Jugga the Jack back again, a disillusioned, broken man, was a great shock to everyone.

'It's good to see you again, boyee,' he said as he embraced Maluka. 'You've grown big and strong !'

'How was India, Jack ?'

'It's a filthy, dishonest country, boyee, let me tell you. All their talk about the spiritual stuff is utter humbug. Gold is their God. And their hands reach out for it like the claws of a kite, swooping down on a piece of yellow maize bread. They're more ravenous than vultures, more noisy than the crows.'

'You haven't lost any of your colourful speech, Jack.'

'No, but I've lost a few of my teeth, and many of my bones ache.'

Jugga who had worked hard was never able to save much. He didn't believe in depriving the old Adam in him of his basic appetites and yet he often sent money orders to help out his three married brothers in the village. But on his return, they expected more. And when Jack could give very little, they felt he was withholding their due. Quarrels followed and, one against three, he was badly beaten up.

'I shouldn't have gone back in the first place, boyee,' he said regretfully. 'It's awright if you've got a wife and children back there. If you're alone, you're better off in the woods of Canada. The air is fresh in the logging camps and the food is good, and if you get your bones broken you get some compensation.'

'What do you plan to do, Jack?' asked Maluka. 'Natha Singh, you know, is *granthi* now at the Vancouver Gurdwara. He meets everybody. I'm sure he can put you on to something.'

'I don't want to work in the lumber mill, boyee,' said Jack firmly. 'I want to get away from the noise of the mills and the gossip of the cookhouses. I'm joining a few friends cutting timber at piece-work rates near Prince George.'

'People around here will miss you, Jack.'

'Each must go his way, boyee, and I'm hitting the woods. I'll come to see you again, but you won't have to write any letters for me to India, nor fill out those yellow money order forms.'

VI

Dorothy Crawley was an ardent member of the Student Christian movement and a popular student in her junior year. Short and stocky, with large brown eyes in a moon-like face, she wore her thick chestnut hair parted in the middle and tied into a bun at the back. It was not her beauty that accounted for her popularity; people were drawn to her for her warm cheerfulness and transparent sincerity.

'Maluka,' she said, raising her small hand gently, 'why not join us in an S.C.M. meeting next Saturday afternoon? I've asked you several times before, but you've never come.'

'I live very far, Dorothy', explained Maluka apologetically. 'It's halfway to New Westminster, and most of the time I ride my bike. I get very little time for meetings.'

'Is that the only reason, Maluka?' she asked, looking full in his face.

'Yes', replied laconically.

'Maluka,' she said with a rich smile and great warmth in her eyes, 'you often say that the Anglo-Saxons suffer from colour

prejudice. And I agree. But is it possible that you also have a prejudice against Christianity ?

'I don't think so.'

'Perhaps you're not aware of it', she continued. 'Will you think about it ? And try to come to the meeting next Saturday Reverend W.B. Thompson is speaking on Gandhi. And here's a copy of Romain Rolland's biography of Gandhi; it just appeared in English. I thought you'd like to read it.'

'Thank you, Dorothy, You're very thoughtful. I'll try to be there next Sunday.'

Maluka wondered whether there was not some truth in what Dorothy had said. In the Punjab, converts to Christianity, except the educated few, had come from the lowest classes, the *Chamars*, the *Churhas*, and the conversion had by no means raised their social status. Christianity in India, moreover, was identified with the ruling power, resented by the people. And the Anglican Church was a state church; it functioned more like the ethical department of British imperialism than a religion.

Maluka felt that he might well be prejudiced against Christianity.

Rev. Thompson was presented to the audience with a glowing tribute to his devotion to Christianity and love of mankind. In the theological seminary where he had studied, it was emphasized, he had been the only student who had volunteered to share a room with a Chinese, also preparing for the pulpit. This high praise for doing what white students did for each other without a thought, stirred anew, even sharpened, whatever prejudice Maluka had against Christianity.

Mr Thompson, however, gave a very appreciative account of Gandhi. The Mahatma, he said, was a man of God; he had been inspired more by the New Testament than the Gita. When in England, he had been drawn to Ruskin, not Huxley; Tolstoy, not Marx. He was a man of peace and goodwill, the best bulwark against the forces of atheistic materialism and moral anarchy. Instead of putting him in jail, we should compromise with him to protect our values and our interests.

'How did you like the speech, Maluka ?' asked Dorothy.

'Very good,' replied Maluka enthusiastically. 'It was the best speech I've heard on India so far since coming to Canada.'

Maluka met a number of students, Christians of the heart, striving to see a world at peace and attempting to live by the principles of Christianity. They were most anxious to have others who would support and join them. But Maluka was beginning to question religion altogether, both in the world and in the new. In India, the justification of untouchability on the basis of the *Shastras* or as an expiation for the individual's misdeeds in the past, he felt, was only a little more sophisticated than the defense of slavery by the Southern clergy in the U.S.A. on the ground that Noah had cursed Ham and his offspring for having made light of the old man's drunken relaxations. Religion everywhere, he found, had sided with the strong in the exploitation of the weak, supported reaction and encouraged blind belief breeding bigotry. In spite of the weekly unctuous assurances from the pulpit, that God ruled the world, he saw that it was the self-interest of the strong that made it go round. The message of Christ, the message of 'mercy, pity, peace and love' was little in evidence in actual practice. Its current version had become : To him, who hath much, more shall be given; and he who hath little must learn to do with less.

VII

'You must see Seth Karim, Maluka,' said Satnam Singh. 'He's the only Gujarati among us and his early life remains a mystery. Even his real name—Gagan Bihari Lal—is not known to most people. But he's been in the forefront of our struggle here, and he was a fiery speaker. He runs a second-hand bookstore for a living now, but something of the old is still in him. He's like a smouldering volcano.'

'Didn't he come from the East coast of the U.S.A., together with other students—Babu Harnam Singh, Taraknath Dass, Teja Singh,' asked Maluka.

'He came about the same time,' replied Satnam, 'but nobody knows from where and how. Teja Singh, as you know, is now a professor of Divinity at the Khalsa College, Amritsar. Taraknath is teaching in a college in New York; and Babu Harnam Singh became a martyr as an ardent Ghadr leader. Of that group only Seth Karim is with us now.'

Satnam told numerous stories about him as they walked up

Hastings Street, munching sugared almonds purchased from an elegant confectionery shop next to David Spenser's. Passing by the grey cenotaph, the Daily Province building and the small noisy Central Streetcar Station, they turned left at the Public Library, a beautiful weather-beaten stone building, into Main Street. With each block the small buildings on the street looked more and more shabby. One of these carried a signboard in faded red letters on a whitish background, announcing Karim's Bookstore, and in smaller letters underneath : Second-hand books purchased and sold.

A stocky old man with a thin grey moustache and steel-rimmed glasses sat at a desk reading. He was much too absorbed in his book to notice customers.

'Hello, Seth Sahib,' greeted Satnam Singh. 'How are you keeping ? We never see you at the Gurdwara now.'

'Hello, Satnam. It's good of you to come to see me,' said the old man with a faint smile and a tired look in his eyes.

'I want young Maluka to meet you. He can learn much from you. As much as he's learning at the University, if not more.'

'It's kind of you to say that, Satnam. I'd rather be proud of worthwhile action than of book knowledge. The turbulent days of the Ghadr and the *Komagata Maru* are gone. It's all quiet in India, too. Gandhi, that Gujrati *bania* with his God business, has made a mess of it all. A revolutionary with love and peace ! The fellow took fright at the first sight of blood. Ah ! holy India !'

'India will change very slowly,' said Satnam Singh.

'How was the mamaland when you left, Maluka ?'

'All quiet as you've said, Seth Sahib.'

'Well, I spend my time reading now. The store is more like my library than my business. It costs me little to live.'

High shelves in the large room were loaded with books. They were everywhere—in the half-open boxes in the corners, piled on the floor, and lying on his desk. Their musty odour mingled with the pungent smell of curry, for a partition at the back of the room ill-concealed his living quarters.

Seth Karim knew his books. It was with great enthusiasm that he talked about his favourites—books on science and rationalism and on the great upheavals of history. He mention-

ed Thomas Huxley, Voltaire, Proudhon, Tom Paine and Marx with respectful awe.

'Have you any books on Indian thought?' asked Maluka cautiously.

'You mean on Buddha and Vedanta, on Yoga and the occult stuff,' he said cynically. 'You have to go to the Theosophical Lodge for those. Retired English Colonels and elderly forlorn ladies are hipped on them. And if you want something on the Sikh religion, the Scottish lady in the Public Library will show you with great pride the books written by her countrymen on the Sikhs—their history by Cunningham and the six volumes on their religion by Macauliffe.'

'I shall go to the library on the way back.'

'We've had enough of religion, Maluka. Read something that would liberate the mind from superstition. Here's one—*The Martyrdom of Man* by Winwood Read—that will open your eyes.'

'I'll buy a copy for Maluka,' said Satnam.

'What are they doing at the Gurdwara these days, Satnam?'

'They're all excited over the Akali movement in the Punjab now. After the shooting at Nankana Sahib, the Sikhs, as you know, launched a movement to take possession of their Gurdwaras, controlled by the *Mahants*.* They have been taking a horrible beating from the police at several places as they march in peaceful *jathas* (batches). And now a *jatha* is to be sent from here.'

'Aren't there enough Sikhs in the Punjab to take the police beating lying down?' asked Seth Karim. 'Is anybody so stupid here that he will travel all the way back to have his picture taken while the police breaks his head with a *lathi*? This Gandhi philosophy of nonviolence has started to degenerate even the Sikhs.'

'Many of us are not happy about the *jatha*,' said Satnam. 'Even in the Punjab, the Babar Akali movement, a group of terrorists led by Garhgaj Singh, a former army officer, has risen against this pacificism. And they have already thinned out the ranks of the oppressors. Many people here would rather send

* Priests who had acquired a hereditary control of the Gurdwaras, where they served originally as readers of the *Granth Sahib*.

help to the Babars than despatch a *jatha* to take punishment with a prayer.'

'Ah, that religion again,' exclaimed Karim. 'The Hindus have organised the Mahasabha, the Mohammedans the Muslim League and the Sikhs the Akali movement. Who is to fight for the free, reunited secular republic of India that we dreamed of?'

As Satnam and Maluka were about to leave, Seth Karim went behind the partition and came out with a slender volume. It had a worn out red binding.

'I want to give you this, Maluka,' he said with great joy. 'I've read it so often that I know many passages by heart. You must read it aloud to yourself.'

It was a collection of *Speeches* by Robert Green Ingersoll.

Maluka was deeply impressed by his knowledge and generosity.

'Come again when you have the time,' said Karim with great warmth, as the two left the bookstore. 'I'm always here.'

VIII

It was in Seth Karim's bookstore that Maluka first met John McPharland. A tall wiry man with large protruding brown eyes and a bulging forehead, McPharland had lived in South Africa and knew Gandhi.

'It was amazing to see those Indian men and women with their spindly legs, carrying huge loads on their heads,' he would say, his thick Scottish accent softening the sharpness of his speech. 'The indentured labour was only a substitute for slavery which had started rather late to bother the Christian conscience of Wilberforce!'

He was a man of great knowledge and firm convictions which he expressed with vigour. Maluka loved to hear him talk.

'I've followed Gandhi's work in India,' he would explain. 'He's no fool. He has managed to get both the masses and the Almighty on his side, and he can get all the money he wants from the Bombay capitalists. He's a mascot of the bourgeoisie with the loin cloth of the peasant. After a few skirmishes, he'll make a deal with British imperialism. It's only a question of time!'

John McPharland lived in a small house, not far from Karim's bookstore, with his quiet and hard-working wife and their beautiful young daughter Mary. Maluka was often invited there.

He worked in a warehouse and spent his spare time reading or brooding over what he had read. Works by Marx, Lenin and Trotsky shared his bookshelf with Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns. He was a strange mixture of the fanatical and the romantic. A messianic glow came to his large eyes when he talked about Marx and Lenin.

'Many have dreamed of a society built on peace and justice,' he would say. 'A society where man is not exploited by man, and where work and worth go hand in hand.'

'Yes, Mr McPharland.'

'But they didn't succeed in bringing it about, because they didn't have a method. Marx has given us a method. Do you understand, Maluka ?'

'Yes, Mr McPharland.'

'And now we have both a mission and a method,' he would emphasize. 'What more do you want ?'

'That's a lot, Mr McPharland.'

'More than that, Marx has placed the dynamics of history in the hands of the working class. The leverage for moving history is in your hands and in mine. And the dispossessed of the world, brown, black and white, all united can break their chains. Do you understand, Maluka ?'

'Yes, Mr McPharland.'

One day he put an old, heavily underscored copy of *The Manifesto* into Maluka's hand with a terse assertion. 'This will work better than the Gita, Maluka.'

The ideal of social justice appealed to Maluka, even more its methodology. He was not sure, however, whether the working people in B.C., even when organised into unions, were ready to join the brown and the black to bring about the social ideal of McPharland's dream.

IX

In a short period the Hindustani Young Men's Association had become very popular with the Indian community in B.C.

Its cyclostyled bi-weekly *Sandesa* (the Message), read out aloud to groups of Sikh workers, was eagerly awaited everywhere. Its Sunday evening meetings in the basement hall of the Gurdwara were crowded. Promising young poets read their compositions, and songs, old and new, were sung. Balwant Singh gave a commentary on current events and Maluka specialized in giving short biographical sketches of great men who had moulded history—Rousseau, Voltaire, Tom Paine, Mazzini, Garibaldi, Marx, Lenin.

The orthodox in the community, however, were not happy with the growing interest of the young in Western thought. It was, they felt, too materialistic and some denounced it as anarchical atheism. For the time being, however, they were pre-occupied with preparations for sending the Canadian Akali *jatha* in response to the call from the Akal Takht. Eleven devoted Sikhs, in the old tradition of self-sacrifice for the Khalsa, had volunteered to go and a large fund had been collected to finance it.

One Sunday afternoon, following the termination of the Akhand Path ceremony in their honour, the *jatha* was garlanded and photographed on the steps of the Gurdwara and given a hearty send-off.

The orthodox were now more free to cope with what they called the westernization of the young.

‘Every Sunday evening,’ said Hira Singh with an accusing finger pointed at Maluka, ‘you glorify some European thinker in the Gurdwara. Is there no Indian to deserve your eloquent praise?’

‘Great men,’ replied Maluka, ‘belong to all mankind. There’s no East or West for them. They have attempted to serve and enlighten all. And all have benefited by their thought and actions.’

‘But you put too great an emphasis on science and material progress,’ said the scholarly Gian Chand. ‘Is there nothing beyond these? The West has made great progress materially. That’s good. But it’s already showing signs of decay.’

‘There may be more than science and reason in life,’ replied Maluka. ‘But these two have liberated man from many superstitions and much oppression. We need these very much. They too are spiritual forces, for they create a necessary foundation

for the possibility of spiritual progress for all.'

The discussion that followed was more than lively, for many took part with more heat than light. The heritage of India, it was agreed, was rich in spiritual values, but science and technology were needed to provide for the material needs of the ordinary man, so that he, too, may seek the joys of the mind and the spirit. Both, they felt, should be integrated to enrich life.

X

Maluka often thought of the happy school days, still very fresh in his mind. How fortunate to have had his introduction to the New World through boys and girls from simple homes—the future citizens of Canada, so frank and gay, exuberant with the joy of life, innocent yet of its complexities.

Alone in his shack, he often thought of them. Their faces bright, natural, cheerful flashed across his mind in quick succession. Some of these, fondly remembered, he loved to hold for long. What might they be doing, all those genial schoolmates now drifted apart, he wondered.

Some of them he was happy to meet at the University. But many had entered the world of struggle and strife; they had started to earn their living. Clarence, the chief of the paper delivery boys, worked in the circulation department of *The Daily Province*; the small, speckled-faced Douglas in a canning factory on Lulu Island; and the muscular Jack was a loader in a shingle mill on the Fraser. Rose, the mischievous red-head, was employed as a salesgirl in a candy shop; Barbara, always very conscious of her melon-shaped breasts, was selling ladies foundation garments; and shy little Jean helped her father in the family grocery business.

But Maluka knew nothing about the one most close to him. Doris was far away, beyond the Rockies. And more than the mountain stood between them. It was the barrier of silence, more exasperating than the rugged distance. And yet this barrier of opaque silence was always vibrant with vivid memories—teasing, tormenting, exciting: luxuriant black hair tumbling down her shoulders voluptuously; a stealthy look of secret

fondness and the flushed face of embarrassment; a sweet voice full of comfort and encouragement; the soft warm touch of her hand and the tingling nerves; the long delightful walks on the cobblestone roads through the thick brushwood.

One Saturday in May, late in the afternoon, Maluka noticed a young lady beyond the lumber-yard, now cleared of all the piles, coming towards the river with energetic steps. Could it be Doris, he wondered? Or was it just an illusion of a lonely young man whose mind had dwelt on beautiful memories with such intensity that the imagination walked like reality?

Soon she approached the shack. A good eager embrace assured him that it was no illusion: it was a dream come true. And the rich warm feel of her lips and the glow in her gentle eyes conveyed more than words could say.

'It's hard to believe that you're here', he said, looking with joy into her eyes and stroking softly her thick black hair glistening under the slanting rays of the sun.

'It's wonderful to see you again, Maluka.'

'You never wrote. I wondered what had happened to you. I was afraid I'd never see you again. But I clung to what I had of you in my heart.'

'To where would I write to you, Maluka? You live alone in this desolation. With all the ashes and the charred piles the place looks like a vast crematorium.'

'I get my mail at the Vancouver Sikh Temple. My old friend Natha Singh is the priest there now, and he sees to it that I get it quickly.'

'I've come to spend a holiday with my uncle in Vancouver. And how was I to contact you? Even the police couldn't have found you here. So I just came. You are like Robinson Crusoe on the edge of civilization.'

'Only I have running water, ready fire-wood and a rent-free shack. And the plutocrats in the mansions of Marine Drive are happy to have an unpaid watchman look after their property.'

'Aren't you frightened here alone, Maluka?'

'No! I love the river. Every second new water and yet the same old unchanging river. It's so easy to grow fond of it. It's always a soothing sight. Come and sit with me on the

old bench and watch it flow like the time of joy when friends meet.'

'You should be writing poetry when you're here alone,'
'But I'm not here alone. The place is full of beautiful memories for me. You're often here—warm as life, fresh like a flower,'

'That should make you write poetry all the more!'

From the bench they could see the length of the river for a long distance, and across the river the lush green flat land of Lulu Island was reaching for the horizon.

The sun was setting beyond the hills behind them and the river, swollen with muddy rain water, looked light gray in the dusk. The rising tide eddied and whirled in the little inlets eaten into the bank; rising still higher, it lapped gently against the wet earth or gurgled in the bare tangled roots of the shrubbery. The birds had folded their wings and silence was stealing on everything.

'How's the varsity, Maluka? Are you as popular with the girls there as you were at the school?' she asked mischievously.

'It's exciting. We have a beautiful young French teacher—bobbed black hair, dark bright eyes, white even teeth and deep dimples when she smiles!'

'I'm sure she's a better teacher than I was.'

'She doesn't blush the way you did. And I don't know how warm is her touch. But I'm sure you'll be her star pupil.'

'It's not likely that I'll ever be in a university, Maluka. How much can a salesgirl in a ladies' ready-to-wear shop save, even if she lives at home?'

'How's Calgary?'

'A beautiful small town. Not many jobs. You're in the Prairies, and not far from the Rockies. The plain rises to meet the mountain and the air is crisp. Will you come—a mountain to the plain—to meet me there?'

'It's far. But who knows?'

'It's not far, if the urge is strong.'

'Is the strength of the urge hidden from you?'

'What're you going to be, Maluka?'

'I'll probably remain a lumber jack. Mr McPharland says

there's a great future in organizing the working class, for it alone can bring justice and peace to the world through a classless society.'

'You're not going to be a communist !'

'What's wrong with that ?'

'Nobody would listen to you. Here everybody who's not a capitalist wants to be one.'

'But I can't become a capitalist,'

'You'll become a lawyer or a professor. You'll certainly make beautiful speeches in the years to come, I can tell you that !' and she kissed him impetuously on the lips.

Soon the darkness swallowed everything. Some scattered stars twinkled dimly and vanished behind the floating clouds. A few distant lights glimmered on Lulu Island. Everything, except the river, seemed asleep. The darkness and the silence drew the two even closer to each other, their bodies glowing with the tidal joy of life.

'Have you no light here ?' she asked.

'What do you want lights for ?'

'I want to see you.'

'Isn't it enough to feel this heavenly joy ?'

'I want both. I want everything.'

'No bright electric lights here. Only a small kerosene oil lamp in the cosy shack.'

'And the two of us !'

'And the two of us like one !'

5 The Growing Conflict

TO be young and alone was not always heaven, but it was a great asset for easy mobility and quick adjustment. Life demanded much; it gave back much more. There was no peace, but peace was not wanted.

With time the conflict between the values of the Old World and the New sharpened; its range continued to widen. Maluka accepted the new with the eagerness of youth; much of it with great joy. He clung to the old, without an effort and yet with quiet tenacity. The new, so fascinating and impressive, had to be gained through arduous effort. The old, like a mother's blessing, was always there; defying distance, it continued to live within him, often hidden even from himself.

The new was too vigorous to be ignored, too tempting to refuse. It appealed to the senses as much as to the mind. The old combined the tenderness of the spring with the rich colour of the autumn, and it was bowed with fruitfulness. It served more basic things in life than the eager senses and the restless mind. It kept him encouraging company when he was alone and walled him in with fond concern when the crowd pressed against him. It sustained him in his difficulties; it strengthened his resolve and energized the will in moments of stress.

But the old and the new were never at peace within him for long. At times there was confusion, perplexing enough but short-lived, for an active life could not nurse indecision for long. At others, he managed to achieve a *modus vivendi*, and established a measure of coordination, if not harmony, between the two. Normally, however, he shuttled, both physically and mentally, between the old India of his community, closely knit by the strange, not always friendly, environment, and the vast new world surging oynamic optimism and youthful vigour —taming and tearing nature with a reckless waste; building, expanding and rejoicing with tremendous self-adoration in its vast and successful effort.

The more he attempted to resolve his conflict, the sharper it

grew, for his increasing and admiring contact with the New World energized the slumbering forces of the old. Doubt was not resolved, nor did the questioning cease.

For many long years, this conflict was to remain with him till, at last, he was to learn, after rapturous joys and tormenting sorrows, that all gods have feet of clay, all dreams die. Just as gods had acquired their potter power from the faith of the believer, the dreams had received their lustre and their nourishment from the growing wonder of the imaginative seeker. But men must learn to recreate their gods anew and bestow upon them the cherished powers, just as they must burn the dreams that are dead, shed a tear, and gather together the dreams which remain. For life longs for fulfilment—hope calls, faith confirms, and there is for ever the open road, endless and full of promise, with the quiet optimism of nature and the ceaseless hum of human struggle.

For the time being, however, the conflict within Maluka became very intense, for it grew out of the vital urge of life and its basic need. It grew out of religion—not at all amenable to reason; indeed, far beyond it.

Maluka thought much about it.

His religion—the religion of Guru Nanak—to which he held tenaciously for its faith that Truth was eternal and formless, was, originally, a revolt against the empty ritual and meaningless ceremonial of the current faiths in India. It sought freedom from bondage to forms and symbols. It promised man a light of the spirit, a richness of the heart and the will to fruitful action.

Why, then, the emphasis on forms and symbols in Sikhism now? Was the unshorn hair and the turban an essential part of Guru Nanak's religion?

So Maluka questioned.

It was true that men who had achieved great spiritual powers through arduous self-discipline in ancient India wore their hair long. Unshorn hair, moreover, had been traditionally associated with strength. In addition, there was the grim fact of history met with determination. The rugged invaders from the North-West who rode their spirited horses into the fertile plains came with their beards and long hair

flying fiercely in the air, their gleaming swords thirsty for blood. They had to be met with a similar force.

The Sikhs at that time, moreover, had volunteered for the baptism of the Khalsa. The price for honour might be death, but the glory of martyrdom and the eternal beatitude were greater than the fear of death. Only the select, the selfless and the brave came forward for the *pahul*; only they were wanted, for they, even if small in number, were mightier than a multitude without light and courage and faith.

With time, however, every child born in a Sikh family received the *pahul* as a normal ritual. To choose with joy the path of martyrdom was one thing; to put on the insignia of a would-be martyr after a happy ceremony quite another. It was true that the tradition continued to mould the Sikhs into strong and brave men, but the form was becoming identified with the spirit; at times, it dominated, even stifled, the spirit.

Thus Maluka felt that even if for historical and the current social and political reasons, the long hair and the turban were essential for a Sikh in India, were they of equal significance in Canada?

Maluka couldn't say yes.

He, therefore, decided to cut his hair and discard the turban.

He was fully aware that this was not a trivial, nor a purely personal matter. He knew, painfully well, that it would shock his community—the orthodox would mourn the death of a solemn promise!

After much thought and many sleepless nights, Maluka took his decision. Still the inner conflict tortured him. He was haunted by familiar faces with venerable beards. He knew that after listening to his speeches in the Sikh temple with pride and admiration, the orthodox and the faithful had begun to entertain great hopes of his becoming a persuasive exponent of the Sikh religion. And, therefore, the cruel deception of a renegade would give a fierce edge to their anger, for they would believe, and in grief say loudly, that the apostasy of the educated could spring only from some monstrous corruption or vice.

It was unbearable for him to think that soon the tragic news would reach India, and the reaction of his community in B.C.

would be duplicated in his village with greater disbelief and deeper agony. His mother would be disconsolate; Mata Gujri would be heartbroken !

But Maluka had made up his mind. The vast distance from home, he hoped, would make it easier for him to bear the grief of his family and friends. In Canada, in spite of his intimate ties with his community, he had started to grow his roots within himself. And although the affection and appreciation of his people meant much to him, he understood and decided to bear, with stoic resolve, their deception and disappointment, their sorrow and anger.

II

For three years, Maluka had often walked by Jack's Barber Shop, a small isolated shack on Fraser Street, some hundred yards towards Marine Drive below the small conglomeration of stores. He had often exchanged greetings with the bald little man, had a pleasant chat with him when he was free. When Maluka entered his shop, therefore, Jack was not at all surprised.

'How's the varsity, Maluka,' he asked. 'You're going to be a learned man !'

'The varsity's fine, Jack,' he said casually, for he had other things on his mind.

'Are the girls with higher education any better than the girls around here ?'

'A little more sophisticated, much less sweet.'

'So long as they're pretty, you can put up with the one and not mind the other.'

'You'll never change, Jack.'

'What's the big news, Maluka ?'

'Well, Jack, you can cut my hair.'

'Cut your hair,' exclaimed Jack, his mouth open and the white of his eyes large with surprise. 'Maluka, are you out of your mind ?'

'What's wrong with that ? Most people here go about with short hair.'

'But it's your religion, Maluka !' You are not giving up your religion, are you ?'

'I don't need it.'

'Maluka, is this what you're learning at the university? No religion, I say, no good. You stick to your religion as I stick to mine. I can't cut your hair, Maluka.'

'What about your business?'

'What's the good of business,' he replied dejectedly, visibly terrified, 'if I'm finished by your people!'

A week later Maluka was back at Jack's Barber Shop. And he managed to convince him that the length of the hair had little to do with a virtuous life. Nervously, Jack agreed. But before picking up his comb and scissors, he pulled the blind half-way down the window.

'What long beautiful hair you've got, Maluka!' he kept on repeating, as he combed it down. 'A woman would give anything to have hair like this!'

His hair cut, his face shaven and without a turban, Maluka could hardly recognize himself in the mirror. His short trimmed hair, free from the twist of the top-knot, curled up like the coat of a black poodle. And his shaven face looked like a baby's behind! He felt as if Jack had inflicted a punishment upon him for his crime. The barber had, in fact, shaped him into a target for the sharp ridicule and mordant quips of his countrymen.

III

The news of Maluka's apostasy spread quickly in his community. Ingenuity combined with malice and exaggeration with a grain of truth to give possible reasons for the crime. Some said that it was the materialism of the West that was driving young people away from religion. Others maintained that it was the desire to please the girls who preferred to kiss a smooth face. Some lamented the spirit of the times; others the inherent weakness of the person. All agreed that it was better not to let the young get too westernized.

Maluka received a stream of visitors on week-ends and the cookhouse became lively again with the colourful Punjabi idiom. Some came out of curiosity, some out of concern. Some came

with long faces as mourners do after death, and spoke in subdued, even sorrowful voices. Some joked with glee, combining satiric phrase with words of mock admiration. Most of them boasted that they had seen the thing coming. All gave free advice.

'It was the right thing to do,' said Jugga the Jack, 'and don't let the show you the daylight. They would want you to hang as they do.'

'You should have done it sooner,' said Ganda Singh. 'Others will follow you. The hair will become short when they grow in intelligence.'

Satnam Singh was indifferent. 'It doesn't matter whether you cover your head with a turban or a hat,' he said philosophically, 'the important thing is the stuff inside.'

'Sooner or later you would have cut your hair anyway, boyee,' said Gian Chand, emphasizing the inevitability with a tap of his hand on the table. 'It's just as well that you've done it now, when you're still among us. The people's reaction, now or later, would have been the same.'

Prem Singh and his wife came with their child. 'Your hair is no longer than the baby's,' said his wife with great surprise. 'You looked so distinctive with your soft curly beard and beautiful turban. Now you'll be lost in a crowd.'

'Poets must wear their hair long, Maluka,' said Prem Singh. 'Let it grow again.'

Bhai Tara Singh came alone and early one Sunday morning. He was sorrow-stricken and spoke softly; at times he was barely audible and tears came to his eyes.

'Maluka,' he said, 'you know I've no children and much land. I had hoped to adopt you as my son. And now you've left us in shame. You're gone from us for ever. It's so cruel! How could you do this?'

A group of orthodox Sikhs came like an authoritative deputation.

'Everyone makes mistakes,' said their spokesman, and 'everyone can correct his mistakes. You are young, Maluka, and hold much promise. All your education will be paid for if you join the *Panth* again. All would be forgiven and forgotten.'

Maluka could not revert to orthodoxy any more than he could revive his yesterdays, so turbulent in the heart.

Ganda Singh had a different approach and made a more tempting offer.

'The Ghadr Party is looking for bright young men, Maluka,' he said flatteringly. 'We are prepared to pay for their education here, for their travel abroad, and for further training in Moscow,' he added with a persuasive voice and challenging gestures. 'We attach no strings to our offer. But we hope that these young men will devote themselves to the liberation of our people.' 'Maluka!' he emphasized, 'you've got a wonderful chance to make something of yourself and serve your people at the same time. Think about it. No hurry to decide.'

Maluka was confused, bewildered and depressed. He could take none of the suggested courses. He felt he must study and resolve his own conflicts with better knowledge. There was no certainty in his mind, and less peace.

Nor was there any harmony within the Indian community in B.C. Apart from group rivalries, rooted in the regions of origin, each boasting to have produced the best Punjabis, there was a growing political cleavage between the orthodox and the Ghadrites who had outgrown their pre-war nationalism and had embraced Marxism with ardour. Deprived of political rights, with little education and narrow interests, the small Sikh community was beset by nagging problems.

Maluka decided to leave B.C. The longing to see the Prairies and the vast country beyond had always been there; the sad break with his community precipitated his crossing of the Rockies.

IV

The time had come to part and make farewells.

It was easy to part from the tall proud conifers and the birches with quivering leaves lining the banks of the Fraser, for they had remained preoccupied with their own business. And the mute, meditative seagulls on their perches seemed indifferent. But it was difficult to take leave of the deserted sheds and the old cookhouse, even though they had been empty for long. More difficult still was to leave the river; it had been a faithful and comforting companion. It had conveyed, in soft sounds

and smooth movement, its constant encouragement : use your obstructions as I use my banks and don't cease to flow.

Hardest of all was to say good-bye to the old shack. The heating stove was cold; the board bookshelf empty; and the walls had been stripped of unframed pictures. And yet its emptiness was full of a gorgeous pulsating memory. It had witnessed two ardent spirits, their young athletic bodies on fire, freed for a moment from the trammels of the earth, and wrapped exultantly in the hem of heaven. Not so long ago she had stood there, her black hair streaming half-way down her creamy white back and her soft smooth curves glowing in the dim light of the lamp. Gracefulness combined with beauty, tenderness with warmth, and all had been given with the joy of self-abandonment !

Before taking the 'harvest train' to Edmonton, Maluka went to the Vancouver Sikh temple to make his farewells. He had been an integral part of the community and one of its youngest members. Even the staunch orthodox, still fiercely angry at his outrageous apostasy, softened at the moment of parting.

'We wish you well,' said Hira Singh, concealing his warmth with short sentences spoken with an air of indifference. 'We had hoped that you'd stay with us. We would have been proud of you. But that's not to be.'

'By the grace of the Guru, you are very bright and gifted,' said Ishar Singh. 'But your gifts are not for us. We had grown fond of you. And now you are leaving.'

'We hope,' added Santokh Singh, 'that by the grace of the Guru you'll come back to us. You'll find us unchanged.'

Natha Singh embraced him affectionately. 'You must go,' he said softly, 'where life leads you. You are strong and your spirit is restless. We cannot hold you anymore than the mountains can a swelling stream. But don't forget us.'

So it was with a heavy heart that Maluka walked across Granville Bridge to the C.P.R. station. The gray faces of the rainwashed buildings looked bright in the sun; from both sides of the bridge over the sluggish False Creek rose the din and clangour of the mills; and overhead the wobbly columns of smoke traced erratic patterns in various shades of black.

Down below he saw, perhaps, he thought, for the last time, Sikh farmers from the Punjab, in blue dungarees and leather aprons, turning the wheels of industry. Far on the horizon, the tall green silhouettes of conifers stood like elegant prayerful aspirations of Canada.